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My Progress is Our Progress is a qualitative study that examines how first-generation Latinx students navigate their experiences at three North Carolina community colleges. The Latinx population has significantly increased in North Carolina but that has not translated into an increase in Latinx student enrollment in higher education. The 2019 Equity Report by the North Carolina Community College System Office indicated that Latinx community college students make up only 11% of their total, curriculum enrollment. This study incorporated the LatCrit framework to analyze the institutional aspects of students' experiences while also using the Community Cultural Wealth framework to understand the impact that family and community members had on their academic progress. Evidence from this study suggests that Latinx students relied much more heavily on off-campus resources than those found on their campuses. Specifically, students' personal and familial aspirations contributed to their resilience as they generated their own resources to achieve their educational goals. Students encountered external challenges as they entered their academic programs and their careers and while they were often discouraged, they were not deterred. Their experiences depict an approach to higher education where familial and communal implications outweigh individual benefits to pursuing and obtaining college degrees.

MY PROGRESS IS OUR PROGRESS: LATINX STUDENTS PURSUING
THEIR EDUCATIONAL GOALS AT NORTH CAROLINA
COMMUNITY COLLEGES

by

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To abuelito Salomé y abuelita Celia Robledo and Pedro (Apá) y Sofía (Amá) Rodríguez.

You worked physically demanding jobs and dreamt of new possibilities for your future generations. Your resilience, sacrifices, and vision made this possible. Gracias.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. formal educational system is often touted as a springboard for individuals to better themselves, yet the lack of equitable access to higher education creates disparities in educational outcomes for many students. By looking at the U.S. formal educational system as a pipeline leading from K-12 to higher education (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004), we can begin to understand that there are leaks along the way. The pipeline itself is the conduit through which many students travel for traditional education. It is, however, not the only option, and some students choose--or have it chosen for them--to not follow the pipeline; in other words, they are diverted in other directions. Differing postsecondary advising practices, or lack thereof, are just one example of how schools have influenced a student's career path before they even begin their educational journey (Schwalbe, 2007). This (pre)determination presents an obstacle for communities of color, specifically first-generation Latinx college students as they attempt to navigate a K-12 through higher education pipeline that is systematically designed to limit their ability to progress through it. Those leaks serve as places where Latinx students are often dropped from the pipeline, thus preventing them from pursuing or obtaining a college degree. Without appropriate interventions, the leaks will continue to grow, and in turn, Latinx students will lose agency over their educational outcomes, which will then be dictated to and for them. Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is

to situate my research topic within the field of social and cultural foundations in order to identify the gaps in the educational pipeline that exist for Latinx students, to uplift the ways that Latinx students demonstrate their resilience despite these gaps, and to disrupt the status quo that has perpetuated the existing leaks.

From its inception, the U.S. educational system was designed to serve divergent purposes that were contingent upon an individual's socioeconomic status. These divergent purposes were to prepare wealthy individuals for leadership roles in society through higher education while limiting said access to the working-class citizenry and thus, ensuring a (pre)determined labor force (Spring, 2011). Such strategies helped preserve dominance for the wealthy and the powerful to ensure that their positions of privilege were never jeopardized. However, this also meant that anyone outside of wealthy communities would face a glass ceiling that served to keep them suppressed in society. By looking at this historical reality, one can better understand how divisive (pre)determination was initially practiced in education and how it has been perpetuated over time. This dichotomy serves as a backdrop for understanding how race and ethnicity were indicators of individuals' experiences within education. Based on my professional experience, a particular group of minoritized students who are directly affected by this disparity in access to postsecondary education are first-generation Latinx college students (see explanation of terms section for clarification of the words first-generation and Latinx). Institutions have directly and indirectly created several options for diversions from and throughout the educational pipeline, especially for Latinx students. By way of numerous efforts (e.g., academic advising, complex enrollment processes, lack of student

support structures) Latinx students are often faced with several opportunities to abandon their academic studies, yet the participants in this study did not. My research attempts to bring about awareness of how despite these inequalities affecting first-generation, Latinx college students' experiences at three North Carolina community colleges, students turn to family and community resources, as well as themselves, in order to academically persist.

Rationale

I have chosen to study the Latinx student experience because North Carolina has experienced a 13.8% increase in the Latinx population from 2012-2017 and as such, is a growing sector that should be incorporated into more discussions across the state (Carolina Demography, 2019). While this aspect of our state population is reflected in the public school system where Latinx students make up 17.9% of public school enrollment (NCDPI, 2019) that is not necessarily the case for the North Carolina Community College System where Latinx students makeup only 11% of the total enrollment in curriculum programs (NCCCS Equity Report, 2019) and 7% of the UNC System's undergraduate student population (UNC System, 2019). Community colleges are often a starting point for many first-generation college students (Núñez, 2009), and through my research, I heard directly from students about their experiences on community college campuses. I chose to conduct this research because I have worked in the community college system for over a decade and have witnessed first-hand how secondary and post-secondary experiences simultaneously attract and detract Latinx students. Specifically, I identified whether there were institutional and personal factors that enhanced or inhibited

first-generation Latinx community college students' experiences. This is important because given the significant growth in the Latinx population in North Carolina, this is a sleeping giant who will soon awake and make its presence known in many ways. This is evidenced in Carolina Demography's report that from 2012-2017 North Carolina has experienced a 49.4% increase in voting eligible Latinx citizens age 18 and older, which is an exponentially increasing group of potential voters (Carolina Demography, 2019).

While voting is an important factor to consider within the Latinx population growth in North Carolina it also constitutes a potential influx into community colleges, universities, and eventually into the state's workforce. The demographics in North Carolina are going to impact institutions of all sizes and geographic locations, which is why I chose two mid-level and a large community college for this research. The mid-level community colleges are in counties with both rural and urban components and the large college is in an urban area. All three colleges are in the central part of the state, and I have established working relationships with individuals at these institutions so ease of access to student information contributed to student participation in the virtual interview sessions that I conducted. Community colleges offer college transfer degrees that help students transition to four-year college and university campuses but are often considered training centers that prepare their respective community's workforce. I was especially interested in the Latinx student experience at community colleges because both career opportunities make up a significant component of the K-12 through higher educational pipeline in North Carolina. The timing of this study and its importance to North Carolina aligns with a recent state initiative in the formation of myFutureNC, which is a non-profit

organization whose goal is to increase educational attainment by 2 million people in North Carolina by the year 2030 (myFutureNC, 2019). This is yet another reason why it was important to assess first-generation Latinx college students' experiences at North Carolina community colleges to ensure that all entities collectively work to achieve their intended educational goals.

This work captures first-generation Latinx community college students' experiences in an effort to convey this information to community college leadership teams. As a mid-level administrator at a community college who works closely with current and prospective students, I understand that senior administrators will benefit from learning how institutions serve Latinx students; specifically, for what appears to be a continuously increasing portion of the student body. While community college leadership often hears from Student Government Association (SGA) Presidents, these particular students may not always interact with all students on their campus. The SGA President typically relays information received from students during SGA meetings and based on the responses from the participants of this study, that may not be as inclusive of a group as one would anticipate. Throughout the student interviews that I conducted, none of the participants expressed having participated in or communicated with an SGA representative, which highlights the need for community college employees to hear from more of their student population. Given my experience at two North Carolina community colleges, it is easy for institutions to lose sight of student-centered onboarding efforts and student support programs. However, senior administrators can no longer afford to carry on with the belief that students must assimilate to the college campus but instead, should

seek ways to allow the students' cultural aspects of their identities along with their cultural strengths to be validated on campus while also helping the institution to be more inclusive with its own campus culture. In a previous research project, I interviewed a first-generation, Latinx community college student, and the student mentioned this very thing as a recommendation that they would make to senior administrators at their institution. The student explained that back in high school he and his Latinx friends would gravitate toward their Spanish Teacher's classroom before, during, and after school. The student described how that particular classroom felt different for them than the other high school classrooms and how they would spend their free time there with other Latinx students. It was never an official club recognized by the high school, but it was a space where Latinx students would spend time with others who identified culturally with each other. The student also mentioned that he had not found anything similar at his community college, which was something that socially affected his experience on the college campus. Ultimately, hearing from more first-generation, Latinx college students such as this student will allow community college administrators to learn how to best serve them.

Research Questions

Through this research I captured first-generation Latinx college students' stories about their experiences at three North Carolina community colleges. Through individual and paired depth interviews, first-generation Latinx community college students shared stories regarding social and academic support structures that exist on their college campuses and in their respective communities. My goal was to provide a platform for

these students' stories to positively influence the experiences for future first-generation Latinx community college students. Documenting these students' experiences provided information that community college personnel can use in ways that positively impact experiences for future, first-generation Latinx college students.

I had three major research questions for this dissertation. They were:

- 1) How do first-generation, Latinx students in North Carolina navigate their community college experiences?
- 2) What personal and institutional factors do first-generation, Latinx community college students identify as important to achieving their intended educational goals?
- 3) Based on their experiences at community colleges, what recommendations do Latinx students have for institutional leaders?

Community colleges pride themselves on the ways that they serve their respective communities, so this work provides feedback from an increasingly larger portion of their student body. These research questions harvested useful information from the students' stories, which will allow institutions to reflect on various aspects of their campus services that may need to be modified.

Methods

In order to capture this information, I interviewed 12 first-generation Latinx community college students from working class families at three North Carolina community college campuses. The interviews included students at various stages of their degree programs who reflected on their experiences to inform me on institutional and

personal factors that have contributed to their academic success. The data was collected through three virtual paired depth interviews and six virtual individual interviews with students willing to participate in the study but whose schedules conflicted with the group sessions. This format allowed me to include as many student participants as possible so that I could gain a better understanding of their experiences. Qualitative studies with first-generation Latinx community college students have been done in Texas (see Ojeda, Castillo, Meza, & Pina-Watson, 2014; Vela, Ikonomopoulos, Hinojosa, Gonzalez, Duque, & Calvillo, 2016) and in California (see Gloria, Castellanos, Scull, & Villegas, 2009; Gonzalez, 2002; Madrigal-Garcia & Acevedo-Gil, 2016; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001), but none have been done in North Carolina. This research topic is important because very little work has been done in this field within North Carolina, especially at the community college level. Dr. Rafael Perez (2018) at Forsyth Technical Community College recently conducted a mixed methods study where he surveyed students and held a focus group for community college administrators on the impact that college support programs have on Hispanic students' academic retention and graduation rates. Perez' work was one of two studies, and of those the most recent study, that I found in North Carolina that focused on Latinx community college students, and I used this work as a starting point.

Building upon Perez' work, I chose to conduct a qualitative study in order to share the details of students' experience; in essence, to provide a platform for Latinx students to tell their stories. I understand that statistical information is important to community colleges' need for making data-driven decisions in an era of budget cuts to

education. However, it was important for students to tell their stories because those revealed nuances that are hidden in quantitative research and sharing their experiences and having it documented provided an opportunity for current Latinx community college students to share their stories in ways where they can then empower future Latinx students. Their collective responses depicted the educational landscape for Latinx students on community college campuses in North Carolina.

Explanation of Terms

For the purpose of this paper, I used the term Latinx to encompass people who identify as Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano/a, Hispanic, Latino/a, or those who identified with another specific ethnic identity (such as Honduran, Puerto Rican, etc.) to serve as an inclusive term for all gender and ethnic identities. These different terms have been used, often interchangeably by non-Latinx individuals, and their usage within the Latinx community has evolved over the last few decades (Torres, 2018). The Latinx term incorporates students who do not view gender as binary and may not identify as either male or female. The *x* in Latinx serves as a substitute for the *o* (Latino) or *a* (Latina) used to designate a person of Latin American descent as either male or female; in this way people can understand one's ethnicity without having to name gender.

However, I understand that each term represents a unique aspect of an individual's identity, which could be lost when grouped under the Latinx umbrella. Throughout this work, I was mindful of how extremely powerful labels are and how they served as identity markers for individuals. I use the Chicana/o term as an example of the pride and strength that a term can be for members of a community whose usage

represented a cultural movement in U.S. history. Martínez (1973) explains the importance of the Chicano identity as follows:

The Chicano movement appears to be a force working against some types of acculturation by actively encouraging the continued use of Spanish and the retention of traditional habits and customs. We can no longer say that, like other ethnic groups, Mexican-Americans will soon be assimilated and thus their problems will be over. (p. 596)

Martínez positions the term as one that allows an individual to exist amongst the dominant culture in the U.S. while never foregoing the unique aspects of their Mexican heritage. That is precisely why the participants were asked during the interviews what term they used to express their identities.

Throughout this document, I will often refer to the U.S. American formal education system, which will be used to describe the traditional, public educational system that connects students from secondary through post-secondary education. At times, the terms U.S. American, formal, U.S formal, and other variations of this elongated term will be used to describe this particular public educational pipeline. There will be a specific focus on the nature of community colleges and how they fit into the K-12 through higher education pipeline. According to the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS), the General Assembly created community colleges in 1963 to provide North Carolinians with education beyond high school and as an alternative for individuals who did not plan to pursue a baccalaureate degree. In essence, community college students could obtain highly needed preparation to meet evolving workforce demands, which presents an alternative option than solely attending senior institutions.

In this work, the term first-generation can have different meanings for various students' circumstances. Aguinaga and Gloria (2015) conducted a quantitative study on Latinx undergraduate students' academic persistence rates based on generational statuses at a mid-western university and explained how:

We labeled an individual as first generation in the United States if he or she was the first in the family to be born in the United States; likewise, we labeled an individual as first generation in college if he or she was first in the family to go to college. (p. 19)

While there are scenarios throughout this research where students used the term in reference to immigrant statuses, for the purpose of this dissertation, I used it as an indicator of college degree attainment. Therefore, outside of students' responses, all subsequent references to this term will reflect generational statuses within higher education.

Through these interviews, there were additional terms that participants used such as Hispanic and Mexican as identity markers. The term Hispanic was used as a way of linguistically connecting with other Spanish-speaking cultures while four students used the term Mexican because of their, or their parents' place of birth. Therefore, given the importance of the terminology connected to participants' identities, I was mindful of the language incorporated in this work.

Conceptual Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been applied to higher education in an effort to emphasize the richness of the lived experiences of students of color. Solorzano, Villalpando, and Oseguera (2005) explain:

CRT recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racial subordination. The application of a CRT framework in the field of higher education requires that the experiential knowledge of people of color be centered and viewed as a resource stemming directly from their lived experiences. (p. 275)

The authors explain that failure to validate students' lived experiences is yet another form through which educational institutions, specifically those in higher education, can perpetuate systemic forms of racial subordination. Solorzano et al. (2005) applied their theory to Latinx students in the U.S. educational pipeline and found that Latinx students at community colleges tend to transfer to four-year schools at drastically lower rates than non-Latinx students. The authors cited a 2001 report by the U.S. Department of Education which indicated that while 71% of Latinx students who enroll at community colleges plan to transfer to senior institutions, only 7-20% of students successfully transfer (p. 282). This should be an alarming statistic to community colleges because it highlights how more than 50% of their Latinx study body may not be achieving, or as indicated in this study, changing their intended educational goals.

Understanding Latinx students' experiences while at North Carolina community colleges will help community colleges understand their Latinx student retention rates. Institutional factors were a part of these experiences and in order to understand these, I

used LatCrit as a theoretical framework for my research. “LatCrit is a theory that elucidates Latinas/Latinos’ multidimensional identities and can address the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression” (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). LatCrit assisted me in critically analyzing students’ experiences on their campuses because it aims to challenge deficit model approaches to Latinx students’ inequalities within the U.S. educational system. Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) explain how LatCrit scholars believe that students’ stories and lived experiences should be validated and incorporated into their educational experiences (p. 314). Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) explain why LatCrit is worth applying to education:

In fact, borrowing and adapting the work of critical race and LatCrit scholars, we define a critical race theory of education as a framework that can be used in theorizing about the ways in which educational structures, processes, and discourses support and promote racial subordination. CRT and LatCrit theorists acknowledge that educational structures, processes, and discourses operate in contradictory ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize coexisting with their potential to emancipate and empower. (p. 314)

This explanation positions education as both an opportunity for freedom and also a method for continued oppression. Latinx students’ responses regarding differing experiences throughout the enrollment process, coupled with their experiences once enrolled, provide examples of how their academic progress was both supported and at times challenged by their institutions.

Yosso (2005) introduced a theoretical framework – community cultural wealth – that challenges prolonged deficit-minded perspectives toward Latinx students;

“community cultural wealth is an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77). This framework provides a lens for the experiences of students of color, specifically Latinx students in this study, to be validated as knowledge that is acquired outside of the traditional classroom. Yosso (2005) asserts this by explaining that “the main goals of identifying and documenting cultural wealth are to transform education and empower People of Color to utilize assets already abundant in their communities” (p. 82). This approach changes the deficit-minded approach toward students of color, specifically Latinx students, toward one that recognizes and accepts the knowledge that students acquire from their cultures and communities. When looking at students’ lived experiences and their implications on the college campus, Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth (as cited in Rodríguez & Oseguera, 2015, p. 131) explains that “students across the educational pipeline bring rich experiences from their home and community experiences that often get overlooked within the classroom/school/institutional walls” (p. 131). This serves as an approach to education where students’ lived experiences are validated and incorporated into their formal education.

These two theories were used because collectively, they provided a lens for me to understand students’ responses throughout the interviews. The LatCrit perspective guided aspects of analyzing the interviews where students described their experiences as oppressive or empowering due to their ethnicity. Specifically, it helped to highlight where the institution may have contributed to unpleasant experiences and where opportunities

may have been limited or restricted for Latinx students. However, several students' responses also indicated that institutions contributed to positive experiences that are documented and will be shared as a best practice with other colleges. The LatCrit framework provided a lens for me to view how the institution, as a system, contributed to students' experiences while community cultural wealth allowed me to comprehend how factors outside of the institution influenced students' experiences. LatCrit, coupled with community cultural wealth, were essential in helping me capture students' responses at the macro and micro levels, on how the ethnic/racial aspect of their identities have influenced their experiences on and off community college campuses. Incorporating LatCrit was vital in my decision to conduct student interviews and in turn, to emphasize Latinx students' responses where their race/ethnicity also influenced their experiences. Community cultural wealth as a framework helped determine the particular questions that I asked students in an effort to generate students' responses that uplifted the assets and strengths that students have used to overcome the challenges they have encountered.

Personal Positionality Statement

I have both personal and professional connections to this research. I, too, was a first-generation, Latinx college student who found a leak in the educational pipeline that connects secondary to post-secondary education. As a first-generation college student, the only information I had about higher education was that it was expensive and most likely not a reality for my family, which is why I began the process to enlist in the military. Once I told my favorite high school teacher that this would be the only way to overcome the financial burden that college would be for my family, Ms. Pratt quickly advised me to

hold off on my enlistment and that I allow her to help me explore the possibility of going directly to college. With her help, I applied and was accepted to Wingate University where I became the first person in my family to move away from home and to live on a college campus. This is of note because there were six Latinx students out of the one hundred and six students in my high school graduating class, and I was the only one that pursued higher education immediately after high school. Two of my Latinx classmates enlisted in the military and the other three—two of whom could not enroll in college due to their lack of legal citizenship status—immediately entered the workforce. Looking back at this information helps to contextualize the leaks within the U.S. educational pipeline from my own experience and how it affected Latinx students in my community.

Once I enrolled in college and moved into my freshman dorm, I realized that I looked different from everyone else that I saw on campus. Although I grew up in a small, rural town in North Carolina, my social circle consisted of fellow Latinxs and therefore, not having that community at Wingate did not feel normal to me. I felt like a fish out of water and called my parents several times during orientation week asking to come home because I didn't feel like I belonged on that campus. Shortly before the semester began, I took a foreign language placement test and met Dr. Carmen Rivera, Chair of Foreign Languages Department, who then introduced me to other faculty members in the Spanish Department and I finally felt like I found an area of campus where I belonged. I decided to take Dr. Schuhl's Latin American Literature course in my first semester and to say that his course influenced my decision to remain at Wingate would be an understatement. The ability to spend an entire class learning about the sociopolitical context of Latin

American literature in my Spanish language was fascinating to me, and I found myself prioritizing Dr. Schuhl's assignments over all of my other classes. I would spend most of my free time during the week hanging out in the Spanish Department and I would go home on the weekends to see my family and friends since there wasn't much of a Latinx student population at Wingate. Both of these environments validated my Latinx identity and served as "cultural nourishment" for me while attending a predominantly white institution (PWI) (Gonzalez, 2002, p. 203). Finding a Spanish-speaking community on campus served as a cultural connection between my home and campus communities, which is exactly what I needed to academically persist.

However, the cost of attending a private university was too much for my parents and they informed me during my sophomore year that I would need to withdraw from Wingate and come home to attend my local community college. I struggled with this news and turned to a few close friends to let them know that I would be leaving school at the end of the fall semester. One of them confided that his family had recently told him the same thing and he worked with the Financial Aid Department to take out student loans and was able to remain at the college. Seeing this as the only way to stay at Wingate, I met with a few people in the Financial Aid Department but left with more questions than answers. There was an African-American woman in the department who must have noticed my confusion and desperation and called me into her office where she closed her office door and gave me advice to pass along to my parents to make the student loan application process much easier for us. Whenever I had follow up questions, I found myself waiting as long as I had to in the lobby and turning away other

employees' offers to help me so that I could only work with this particular person because I trusted that she had my family's best interest at heart. I remember watching other students walk in and be able to work with whomever offered to help them but that was not the case for me. While the student loans helped offset the tuition expenses for my parents, I still had to work in order to have my own spending money. I also felt responsible for having to contribute financially to my family's expenses while I was in school, and I would leave campus to go home to work on the weekends. My parents would give me whatever amount of money they could while I lived across the hall from a student whose parents attended Ivy League schools and gave him a credit card with an unlimited spending amount. My weekend job back home was not paying me enough, so I ended up working over 30 hours a week near campus at an auto parts store to have my own spending money. I did not look like most of the people on my campus, and I did not have financial backing like they did, which caused additional stress outside of the academic course load that I carried every semester.

For all these reasons, I feel personally connected to this research topic, and my work in the NCCCS for over 10 years has helped me see that there is additional work to do on college campuses. In my current role as a mid-level administrator at a community college, I oversee a tuition-free, dual enrollment program that grants high school students early access to college credits, which in turn, has the potential to save families a significant amount of college tuition. However, while the program itself removes financial barriers in accessing higher education, enrollment in the program is contingent upon approval from high school personnel, which then presents another challenge. As a

community college system, the demographics in the dual enrollment program for the 2018-19 academic year was 13% Hispanic compared to 60% white student participation (NCCCS, 2019). The community college where I work aligns with these figures in that its dual enrollment program consisted of 13% Hispanic students compared to 50% white students for the 2018-19 academic year. These statistics show that despite a significant financial barrier being removed for high school students, there are still variables that preclude Latinx students from accessing higher education. My role also consists of student outreach efforts where I participate in Spanish-speaking parent nights to work directly with Latinx students and parents to help them navigate college enrollment processes. Making these connections early on helps me build rapport with Latinx students and positions me as a resource for them throughout their time at my institution. As such, Latinx students often stop by my office needing help because they tell me that they do not feel as comfortable asking other college employees.

Thus, in some ways, I was an insider with the Latinx students and their communities that I sought to learn from. Being bilingual and bicultural allowed me to connect with students as someone from within the Latinx community. I began each interview by sharing parts of my personal story and understanding my experiences and the purpose of my research seemed to earn trust with students whose stories may not have been previously heard. This helped me build rapport with students as they then entrusted me with the details of their experiences that I will expand on throughout the rest of this dissertation.

Conclusion

As I have shared from my personal experience in higher education, I had to internalize stressors as I navigated my first-generation, Latinx college student status on a college campus. I was fortunate to find key institutional resources (e.g., Financial Aid Associate, Spanish Department) while also calling upon the connection with my home community to feel like I was prepared to academically and socially succeed on campus. Both of these elements demonstrate that even after accessing higher education, I still faced financial and social obstacles remaining at the institution. After learning to maneuver my way through higher education, I am fortunate to now work in a professional capacity where I can help high school students transition into higher education through a community college.

In the next chapter, I explain in detail how the existing literature on this topic serves as a backdrop and explains the need for further discussions on how community colleges in North Carolina serve first-generation Latinx college students. I share what the existing research on Latinx students' experiences depicts as the variables that factor into students' decisions to pursue a college degree through a community college. Through this literature review, I expand on LatCrit, Community Cultural Wealth, and how both frameworks provide lenses for studying Latinx students' college experiences. I end the chapter by demonstrating how these asset-based frameworks allow Latinx students' lived experiences to be acknowledged as genuine sources of knowledge.

The third chapter guides you through the various steps that I took to begin and to carry out this research project. The chapter begins by explaining how I developed the

research questions for this study and continues by explaining my professional positionality and how the two determined every component of this research. I felt that it was important to establish these components before progressing into the data analysis processes to help you understand how I maintained the integrity of this work. I then describe how I recruited and interviewed the participants in this study along with how I made meaning of their responses.

The fourth chapter introduces the institutional challenges that Latinx students expressed that they faced becoming and remaining college students. This chapter begins with the ways that students stated that their campuses presented challenging situations for them. The chapter continues by sharing the campus resources that students identified as being beneficial to them as they faced various challenges. The chapter then ends with the specific recommendations that students made for their campus administrators and for administrators at all community colleges in North Carolina. I felt that it was important to organize the information in this way because it aligns with the order of the Research Questions for this work and because it allows readers to immediately understand the barriers that campuses present for students. The sequence of the chapter then shares ways that campuses are actively working to address said challenges while ending with the ways that students would like for their colleges to move forward.

The fifth chapter presents the community, familial, and personal challenges that students have encountered as they pursue their educational goals. Students identified cultural assumptions and internal pressures that they have had to overcome. The participants acknowledged those very real challenges and expanded on how their family

members served as direct and indirect support for them. Students then explained how they have had to rely on formal and informal community networks to find and to share resources available to them and to their respective communities. This chapter is also organized in a way that begins with addressing the off-campus challenges that students faced while then presenting how interestingly enough, the students found resources to academically persist from off-campus sources.

I did not initially anticipate there being a sixth chapter but throughout the coding processes, I realized that the students in this study had such powerful stories to tell about their off-campus resources that I felt it would be a disservice to their experiences to simply consolidate their responses into a single chapter. So, that is why the sixth chapter was written as a tribute to the students in this study as my way of uplifting them and their determination to reach their academic goals. The chapter begins by students recognizing all of the obstacles before them leading up to and during their times as college students and while there were moments of discouragement, the students were not deterred. This may read as an oversimplification of their experiences, but I assure you that the Latinx students' refusal to acquiesce highlights their resilience and their commitment to their education. The chapter continues by sharing how during those discouraging moments, students relied on personal and communal reasons for pursuing a college degree as motivation and as encouragement. This chapter then ends with a section where the students in this study shared recommendations for future Latinx college students, which was their way of helping students avoid many of the same challenges listed in the previous chapters. This was important for me to include because readers will come away

with a better understanding of how Latinx students placed such great importance on removing barriers and ensuring the academic successes for future Latinx students' experiences.

The final chapter of this work succinctly addresses how all of the previous chapters address the variables that attract and detract Latinx students from pursuing a college education through a North Carolina community college. In essence, I share how the students in this study answered the Research Questions that guided this work as well as why their stories matter. I also end this work, much like the students in this study, with recommendations for future research on Latinx students and their experiences. I felt that it was only fitting for me to emulate the students' responses by sharing how future research could and should be done to continue hearing from future first-generation, Latinx community college students.

Through this work, I learned from students how they called upon individual and cultural strengths despite there being limited accounts of accessing institutional resources that typically aid students in their pursuit of higher education. The purpose of this work was to highlight the strengths that exist within first-generation Latinx community college students and to identify the gaps in the U.S. formal educational pipeline that students must overcome. This study provided a platform for first-generation Latinx community college students in North Carolina to have their stories heard in an effort to benefit future Latinx students. It is my sincere hope that these students' stories demonstrate a unique model for pursuing a college degree, which would alter what are formally recognized as resources and support structures within higher education.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although the U.S. formal educational system claims to provide a high-quality education for all students, there are still great disparities for many Latinx students. From grade school through higher education, there are obstacles that affect Latinx students' academic experiences, such as limited guidance regarding accessing and affording higher education. If the formal educational system is thought of as a pipeline that connects its various levels, delivering students from early education through higher education, then that pipeline is leaking for certain students. Latinxs often find themselves having to take "special routes and find special solutions" while navigating through such leaks, often redefining the pipeline's intended destination (Juan). The 2012 U.S. Census Bureau found that "only 10.6% of Mexican American college students had received a college degree compared with 30.3% of Whites" (as cited in Ojeda, Castillo, Meza, & Piña-Watson, 2014, p. 2). There are many variables that discourage, even inhibit, college bound Latinxs from obtaining some type of college credential. Identifying these barriers in order to seal these leaks in the educational pipeline is the topic of this research, and I have conducted this literature review in contribution to this dissertation.

In this chapter, I explain three bodies of literature that address the inequalities that Latinxs experience within the community college sector of the U.S. educational system. The first body of literature speaks to the aspects of the educational pipeline that create

leaks for many first-generation, Latinx college students. The second body of literature highlights the tendency for many Latinxs to begin their higher educational journeys through community colleges. The third body of literature explains how first-generation, Latinx college students are often viewed through a cultural deficit model because of their cultural heritage. This deficit model approach is then countered with asset-based approaches that present students' lived experiences as sources of knowledge and support. I also consider the theoretical frameworks and methods of data collection that have been used in such research and as I explain these elements of the Latinx educational pipeline, I highlight why additional research on my topic is warranted.

My research examined how first-generation college students described their educational experiences in North Carolina community colleges, specifically Latinx students. Given that Latinx students are twice as likely as students of all other ethnicities to be first-generation college students, it is helpful to understand the challenges Latinx students face (Excelencia, 2019, p. 6). The growing number of Latinx students graduating from high school presents new challenges for higher education because Latinxs' experiences may be far from equitable when compared to their white classmates. Without proper encouragement and academic preparation in high school, first-generation Latinx college students may continue to slip through leaks in the educational pipeline and either not attend or not graduate from college. My research incorporated first-hand accounts of first-generation, Latinx community college students regarding their experiences on their campuses, which contributed to the existing literature in two ways: (a) only two studies have been published on Latinx community college students in North Carolina and (b)

both of these works were quantitative studies that reflected survey responses and not direct student voices. Through these interviews, I sought to understand students' perspectives about what impacted their community college experiences as they worked toward achieving their educational goals.

Due to the lack of information available on Latinx community college students in North Carolina, I took note of conferences that align with my research interest. During one of my EBSCO searches on Latinx students' experiences in North Carolina, I came across an article from the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies Conference. I focused on the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies Conference and examined their conference themes, agendas, and sessions in order to find new scholars or approaches to Latinx students' experiences in higher education. This particular association was formed in 1972 and has kept conference proceedings available on their website, which has allowed me to review them for issues that connect with my research topic. In looking at their 2018 conference proceedings, I was able to find an article written about Latinx immigrants in North Carolina, which specifically stated that there is a need for additional work on this topic:

Yet, we know very little about North Carolina, its DREAMers, and the Chicanx experience in that state. In fact...there exists a very serious gap in the literature with regard to this geographic region. The time has come for North Carolina and other Southeastern states to be critically examined in our scholarship and for the lives and narratives of its Chicanx people to be documented. (Gomez Menjivar, 2018, p. 55)

The author clearly states that there is a dire need for the Latinx community's stories to be told in North Carolina, which aligns with my work. I also viewed this conference and its

proceedings as relevant to my work because it takes terminology like Chicana/o, which is typically used in scholarly contexts, and the Gomez Menjivar articles applies it to a practical level in North Carolina.

In order to maximize my awareness of the most recent research related to this topic, I also reached out to faculty around me who are asking questions related to mine. These faculty have shared resources and agreed to keep me updated on their research findings if and when something is connected to my work. I have taken all of these measures in an effort to ensure that I approach my research from every possible angle with as many perspectives as possible. As such, I have conducted a thorough review of the existing literature, and I expand on my findings in the next sections.

Analyzing the Construction of Current Research

In this section of the literature review I analyze various elements of the construction of the current research. I begin by explaining where the existing literature has been geographically focused, as well as the methodologies that explain how previous authors have conducted their research. Then I present the theoretical frameworks that existing research has incorporated into their studies. I end this section by explaining the research and interview questions utilized in the literature and demonstrate how there was a need for my research topic.

Location of Research Studies

One observation that I have made throughout my research is that there is information that has been written about first-generation college students and on Latinx students and community colleges. However, even with the support of a resource librarian,

I was unable to find much work that has focused specifically on first-generation, Latinx, community college students in North Carolina. For the works that I have been able to find that align with my research interest, the majority of the research in the articles has been conducted in Texas (see Ojeda, Castillo, Meza, & Pina-Watson, 2014; Vela, Ikonomopoulos, Hinojosa, Gonzalez, Duque, & Calvillo, 2016) and in California (see Gloria, Castellanos, Scull, & Villegas, 2009; Gonzalez, 2002; Madrigal-Garcia & Acevedo-Gil, 2016; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001; Gaxiola Serrano, 2017). Because of my role as a community college employee in North Carolina, I expected to find—and would be interested in accessing—studies that focused specifically on North Carolina’s community colleges because of the shift in North Carolina’s demographics over the last two decades, which reflects a constantly increasing Latinx population. I found two recent studies in North Carolina that focused on academic advising (Alvarado, 2017) and student retention efforts (Perez Velez, 2018), with Latinx students in North Carolina community colleges. Given the limited amount of work that has been published on my research interest, I felt compelled to conduct a qualitative study that emphasized on the intricacies of Latinx students’ experiences, as conveyed by Latinx students at three North Carolina community colleges.

Methodologies

As I reviewed the existing research of how Latinx students navigate the formal higher educational system the majority of the studies that I found were quantitative or non-empirical studies (see Crisp & Nora, 2009; Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nunez, 2009; Hernández & López, 2004). While these

types of studies may provide measurable enrollment data, it is unlikely that they are able to capture students' experiences in their own words because responding to a survey is much different than having someone spend time trying to learn about your own lived experiences. Without the rich details that participants provide in qualitative research, institutions may become aware of Latinx students' enrollment in higher education, or lack thereof, but they may not get an accurate depiction of their experiences, which will limit their ability to properly serve this growing demographic on college campuses. The existing literature addresses Latinx students in higher education and their likelihood to enroll in community colleges but there is little information on Latinx students' experiences in North Carolina community colleges.

Theoretical Frameworks Within the Literature

Within my findings, I noticed that the articles incorporated a few different theoretical frameworks. I initially found a study by Solorzano et al. (2005) that used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework. This framework resonated with me, and I sought subsequent research with a similar framework. Solorzano et al. (2005) explain that CRT in higher education is essential when examining institutional barriers for non-white students. CRT establishes that "race and racism are central constructs but also intersect with other components of one's identity, such as language, generation status, gender, sexuality, and class" (p. 274). The way that all of these elements intersect in higher education to influence non-white students' experiences is what CRT and this study hoped to explain. CRT aims to challenge the dominant ideology, is committed to social justice and praxis, recognizes students' experiential knowledge, and serves to provide historical

context and an interdisciplinary perspective into education (p. 275). Therefore, the LatCrit framework, which is a subset of CRT that focuses on Latinx experiences, provided a lens to understand the systemic barriers that Latinx students faced in the formal educational pipeline.

Additionally, Yosso (2005) introduced a framework known as Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) that examines how individuals' access to aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance capital outside of formal education are strengths that should be acknowledged and validated in education. Pérez Huber (2009) incorporated CCW into her study of ten undocumented Latinx undergraduate students at a top-tier research university in California to understand how students had to use resources outside of the institution in order to access higher education. Pérez Huber (2009) expanded on CCW by introducing another facet to the framework: spiritual capital, which is the realization that students are connected to a greater cause that provides hope and faith for them. Kanagala et al. (2016) expanded on Yosso's CCW framework and introduced four additional sources of capital, which they term as wealth. These additional components are *ganas/perseverance* wealth, ethnic consciousness, spiritual/faith-based wealth, and pluriversal wealth. Through these four sources of capital, students' resilience, connectivity to their ethnic and spiritual communities are recognized, along with their abilities to navigate a new higher education "world" along with their home communities (Kanagala et al. 2016). While briefly discussed here, these courses of capital are expanded on in subsequent chapters as they connect to students' responses. Kanagala et al.'s work influenced my research in the sense that the existing literature

indicates that Latinx students often encounter barriers in higher education and must often seek resources from their communities instead of their campuses. Learning to be resourceful demonstrates a skill set that can be overlooked and it must be recognized as an asset for Latinx students. The Community Cultural Wealth framework emphasizes the validity of learning and resources that students acquire and access outside of academia, which was evidenced in students' responses.

Nunez et al. (2011) used an economic model of college choice framework in their study of how students' financial situations influenced their decisions on if and where to attend college. This is important when trying to understand one of the many barriers that Latinx students must overcome when trying to pursue higher education. Hernandez and Lopez (2004) incorporated Tinto's Model of Student Integration as a framework, modifying it to examine the financial aspect of Latinx students' academic persistence in their study of Latinx college student retention. Rodriguez and Oseguera (2015) introduced an Institutional Culture Framework that puts the onus on the institution to modify its existing practices to validate students' strengths outside of academia, specifically to highlight sources of Community Cultural Wealth. While these frameworks provide different perspectives into the Latinx student experience in higher education, I chose to use LatCrit and Community Cultural Wealth theories in my work to identify how individual, community, and institutional components impact Latinx students' experiences in North Carolina community colleges.

Research Questions

All of the studies that I found addressed Latinx students in higher education through a variety of research and interview questions. Burciaga and Erbstein (2010) conducted research that included young adults, ages 17-22, who left high school prior to graduation. The participants were asked questions related to their resilience in completing their education after leaving a traditional high school in an effort to highlight students' sources of Community Cultural Wealth. The purpose of this work was to emphasize how students left their formal educational setting and utilized resources in their communities to become successful. Madrigal-Garcia and Acevedo-Gil (2016) and Gaxiola Serrano (2017) focused their research on how students' experiences in secondary school influenced their decisions on whether and where to obtain post-secondary education. One work specifically focused their research questions on Latinx students' experiences on college campuses and whether they encountered racial microaggressions (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009). Rendon (1994) conducted research with Latinx students at two and four-year institutions that emphasized the importance of their academic and social interactions and integration onto college campuses.

The research questions behind these works studying Latinx students' experiences have included aspects of Latinx students' resourcefulness outside of academia and its portrayal as a strength despite the formal educational system presenting multiple obstacles affecting their success. The focus of these works was to reframe Latinx students' experiences in education, which LatCrit and Community Cultural Wealth both aim to do as well. Given the geographical, methodological, theoretical frameworks, and

research questions of the existing research, I will now expand on how these four elements impact the interpretation of Latinx students' experiences in higher education.

Latinx Students in the Leaky Educational Pipeline

While high school experiences can impact Latinx students' preparations and plans for college, interactions on the college campus also influence their academic success. Sólorzano, Villalpando, and Oseguera (2005) studied the formal educational pipeline and used the 2000 Census to monitor college degree attainment. Their research found that out of 100 Latinx students that entered elementary school, on average, less than one student would earn a doctoral degree. This statistic is important because it demonstrates that there are leaks, or deviations, within the educational pipeline that preclude many Latinx students from pursuing and obtaining graduate degrees. The lack of Latinx doctoral degree graduates is important to this research because it demonstrates that there are stark differences in professional preparation programs and thus, leading to more Latinx students not pursuing higher education or doing so through a vocational program at a community college. This highlights discrepancies that exist in every step of the way for Latinx students, from accessing higher education all the way through its highest graduate level.

Teachers' negative perceptions of Latinx students risk limiting these students' successes beyond a grade school education and these damaging assumptions and beliefs are deeply ingrained in many educators throughout the formal educational pipeline (Chapa, 2005). Once Latinx students are on the verge of graduating from high school, they are not often viewed as competent and qualified candidates to apply to all colleges

and universities (Madrigal-Garcia & Acevedo-Gil, 2016). If those charged with preparing the next generation of college students do not convey a passion for helping Latinx students excel, then it becomes much easier for the students themselves to question the purpose and reality of pursuing a college degree.

¡Excelencia in Education!, an organization that studies Latinxs' representation and access to higher education, strives to highlight the disconnect that exists for Latinx students accessing and graduating from college. According to ¡Excelencia in Education! (2015), "Hispanics had lower levels of educational attainment than any other groups. In 2013, 22% of Hispanic adults (25 years and older) had earned an associate degree or higher, compared to Asians (60%), Whites (46%), and African Americans (31%)" (p .4). This information serves to highlight the disparity in how Latinx students navigate the U.S. higher education system compared to three other racial groups. Possible explanations for this include:

As the minority student body increases in size and concentration, several schooling problems likewise increase. Achievement scores on standardized tests at all grade levels decline. At the secondary level, when segregation increases, the dropout rate rises, the number of college preparatory courses offered decreases, the percentage of students taking college entrance examinations decreases, and the average college admissions test scores decline. (Chapa, 2005, p.183)

As evidenced by these reports, Latinx students represent the lowest percentage of college graduates and make up about half as many college graduates as their white counterparts. This alarming reality has led to the study of the factors that have helped 22% of Latinx students achieve the "American dream" but also to wonder, what is precluding the other 78% of the Latinx population from obtaining a college degree?

Understanding the variables that lead to this disparity is precisely what LatCrit aims to address and can explain how institutional policies and procedures affect Latinx students. The existing disparities can be attributed, at least in part, to the Jim Crow era policies that were implemented to limit non-whites from accessing education. The efforts to limit non-White students' access to education is expanded on by Madrigal-Garcia and Acevedo-Gil (2016) who use these Jim Crow era policies as a backdrop for Latinx students' experiences and found:

They establish the *New Juan Crow in Education* as a web of power and relegation that is manifested as a school climate of inadequate school resources, academic underachievement, zero tolerance, and a high-security environment. More specifically, school policies, practices, and daily interactions place Latina/o students in a subordinate position that hinders high school completion and postsecondary pathways. (p. 160)

The authors name the myriad of ways that Latinx students' academic experiences are vastly different from those of the dominant culture's experiences. The *New Juan Crow in Education* clearly delineates how institutionalized Latinx students' academic opportunities are restricted and not laid out on a clear path. Madrigal-Garcia and Acevedo-Gil continue explaining that the rigidity of academic and social policies for Latinx students in secondary school are having an adverse effect on post-secondary preparation for these students (p. 169). This is one of the components of the leaky educational pipeline for first-generation, Latinx college students.

Rendón (1994) conducted *The Transition to College Project* where she interviewed over 132 first-year students at multiple institutions to learn about the variables that contributed to their academic success. The institutions included a

predominantly minority community college, a predominantly white liberal arts college, a predominantly black, urban university, and a predominantly white university, each in different areas of the country. Many of the students that participated in this study expressed concerns about their academic abilities during their transition to college. Through this study, Rendón found, “When external agents took the initiative to validate students, academically and/or interpersonally, students began to believe they could be successful. Students were getting their validating experiences both in- and out-of-class” (p. 40). Students’ responses indicate that receiving academic and personal validation from college employees greatly improved students’ academic success. The majority of students responded that there was an individual at the college that “took an active interest in them” (p. 44). For these students, having an advocate and resource available to them helped with their transition onto the college campus.

Hernández and López (2004) went further with their non-empirical study on this topic and found that student interactions with faculty members directly affected students’ academic self-perceptions. Their research found that students who interacted with their professors beyond the classroom were more likely to persist at their institutions and to academically succeed (p. 46). These interactions can be as simple as meeting during office hours, which is all around beneficial for students. Hernández and López’s (2004) research builds on Rendón’s findings that highlight the importance of on-campus validation that Latinx students attributed to their positive experiences in college. The students involved with Rendón’s (1994) *The Transition to College Project* explained that employees from all over campus played a role in their becoming acclimated to the

campus. Specific people mentioned on campus were athletic coaches, faculty members, personal and academic counselors, as well as school administrators (p. 44). The students in this study emphasized the important role that positive interactions with key college employees played in their experience on the college campus. One can better understand the unique nature of the positions mentioned in that most of them have direct contact with students in the enrollment process. While perhaps not as hands-on as the other positions, faculty members directly interact with students once they enroll, and school administrators are charged with overseeing the enrollment process.

Rendon's (1994) findings were confirmed in Alvarado's (2017) work conducted throughout various North Carolina community colleges regarding Latinx' students' experiences with their academic advisors. Alvarado's quantitative study, over two decades after Rendon's work, confirmed Rendon's findings in that Latinx students' interactions with their advisors enhanced or inhibited students' experiences in higher education. Specifically, Alvarado's study found that the eleven Latinx participants indicated that they only met with their advisor once a semester, which was student initiated, and their meetings lasted less than fifteen minutes. Alvarado (2017) recommended that this "presents a problematic picture for campus administrators who should consider requiring diversity training for all academic advisors" (p. 81). Perez Velez (2018) also found in his quantitative study that Latinx students at Forsyth Technical Community College in North Carolina indicated that interactions on campus, specifically with Admissions in the enrollment process, influenced their experiences. Students also indicated that their comfort levels and knowledge of campus resources

played a role in their retention and graduation rates. Perez Velez' (2018) work indicated "One-fourth of Hispanic students (27%) had felt that the college's nonteaching staff (admissions, tutoring, financial aid, etc.) understands me and my cultural background; compared to 52% non-Hispanic had felt as such—a significant finding" (p. 172). These statistics are important because it indicates that half as many Latinx students felt culturally understood on their campus than their non-Hispanic counterparts.

Collectively, all of the findings that I have incorporated into this work address some aspect of my research. However, those that are closer in nature to methods for data collection have been done in other states, specifically in Texas and in California. While Alvarado (2017) and Perez Velez (2018) address Latinx students' experiences in North Carolina community colleges, their research is limited to quantitative methods. In other words, there is a qualitative method gap in the existing literature. Latinx students' responses to surveys provide a snapshot of their experiences but my qualitative work provided a platform for students to describe their experiences in detail as well as to provide feedback for institutional leadership teams.

Latinx Students and Community Colleges

Having established that Latinx students have much lower higher educational attainment rates than their non-Latinx counterparts, we understand that disparities exist within our educational system (as cited in Ojeda, Castillo, Meza, & Piña-Watson, 2014, p. 2). My research conveys what first-generation, Latinx community college students in North Carolina identify as their reasons for and experiences while attending a community college. By hearing directly from students, the information gathered helps institutions

address concerns or share best practices that students indicated as influencing their experiences. Over the last few years, the Latinxs that made it through the educational pipeline in the United States have attempted to bring attention to the fact that college and university student bodies do not reflect the actual demographics of their respective communities. For example, ¡Excelencia in Education! Has been researching and publishing studies on this dilemma since 2004. “In 2006, Latinos represented 11 percent of students enrolled in higher education” (Excelencia, 2008, p. 6). Although Latinxs have been underrepresented in higher education prior to this publication, the statistic helps establish this reality in a fairly recent context. This figure is important because “In 2015-16, Latinos represented 19% of all undergraduate students, compared to Whites (56%), African Americans (14%), Asians (6%)” (Excelencia, 2019, p. 10). So, while there has been an increase in the Latinx undergraduate population, it is still disproportionately lower than other ethnicities.

When looking at the available research that helps track these students, one is able to see a pattern in their college selections:

Latino college students tend to begin their postsecondary educations in community colleges. About 16% of all community college students are Latino, while Latinos comprise about half that proportion (9% and 7%, respectively) of the total student enrollment in the public 4-year and private 4-year sectors. (National Center for Education Statistics, as cited in Núñez, Sparks, & Hernández, 2011, p. 19.)

Due to this fact, one could even say that Latinxs are overrepresented in community colleges (Núñez, 2009, p. 23). The National Center for Education Statistics indicates that in the fall of 2017 Latino students accounted for 25.7% of national, public two-year

institutions, 17.7% public four-year, and 12.3% of private four-year enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). So, while there has been an increase in Latinx representation within higher education, it is still disproportionately higher at the community college level. Núñez et al. (2011) conducted a national study of community college enrollment, and their work closely examined Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs)—institutions whose enrollment consists of at least 25% Latinx students—and compared them to non-HSIs. The results showed that 68% of Latinx community college students were first-generation college students (p. 25). These details help establish that many Latinx students, when able to attend college, make community colleges their starting point. I will now explain the multi-faceted decision-making process behind these statistics that many first-generation, Latinx college students go through when pursuing higher education through a community college.

Cost of Attendance

While the open-door admissions policies may be one reason why any student may choose to enroll at a community college instead of a four-year institution, there are additional reasons as well, and there is research that identifies these reasons specifically for Latinx students. Crisp and Nora (2009) explain that there are geographic and financial factors that heavily influence Latinx students' decisions to gravitate toward community colleges. Community colleges tend to be more geographically convenient to students' native communities. This would be an advantage for students in the sense that they are able to live at home and commute to class, which helps to alleviate some of the financial burden on their families. Since, as previously mentioned, the cost of higher education is

often too expensive for first-generation college students, the cost-efficient community college is much more financially feasible. These financial aspects may appeal more to working class families for whom finances are a significant deciding factor in college enrollment. Once Latinx students enroll at their local community colleges, their home lives continue to influence their daily responsibilities. Due to family obligations, Latinx students may have to enter the workforce leading up to and during their enrollment at community college. It is because of this time spent working that “Latino community college students are more likely than others to be older and to have other nontraditional characteristics that place them at risk for not completing college” (Núñez et al., 2011, p.34). For many working-class families, education may seem like a luxury that people can afford only after they have spent some time contributing to the home’s financial betterment. Rodriguez et al. (2015) found in their study of working with Latinx high school students that most Latinx teenagers are expected to contribute financially to their household (p. 210). Since Latinx students often continue to live at home during their community college enrollment, it is likely that behavior patterns—such as working to contribute to the home—remain similar to those of their high school days (Crisp and Nora, 2009). This is important to note because it highlights the need to juggle work and school, which is also an appealing factor for Latinx students attending a community college (Salas et al., 2018). Crisp and Nora (2009) conducted a national longitudinal study of community college persistence rates for Hispanic students and found:

Moreover, community college students who are financially fortunate enough to enroll full-time were significantly more likely to be successful at the end of years 2 and 3. Related to the inability to enroll full-time is the need to work at the same

time that the student is attending college. Unfortunately, this circumstance was found to negatively impact the likelihood of student success. (p. 189)

This finding is important because it posits that Latinx students who must work during their enrollment at community colleges are often less likely to complete a degree. Crisp and Nora's findings are relevant to this work because my research heard directly from students who juggled full-time employment or full-time college enrollment and shared the personal resources that influenced progress toward their educational goals. Despite community colleges having much lower tuition rates than universities, there are still financial obstacles that Latinx students must overcome. For example, here in North Carolina, a three-credit hour course at a community college costs \$228 (Randolph Community College) and a three-credit hour course at UNCG costs \$552.75 (UNCG) for the 2019-20 academic year. This reality, coupled with the smaller risk of having to take out fewer student loans to pay for college, factor into students' decision-making processes (Salas et al., 2018).

Family

Núñez et al. (2011) found that the geographical aspect of college decision-making reflects more than a money-saving choice, it also highlights the cultural importance of the family for Latinx students. Expanding on this cultural importance, Gastic and Verdugo (2013) introduce the notion of *familismo*, which is an individual's strong connection with their nuclear and extended families that typically results in a heightened sense of loyalty and solidarity. Family values tend to be very important in Latinx communities (see Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Gastic & Verdugo, 2013) so the traditional, or typically

portrayed, U.S. norm of leaving one's family and community to live on a college campus can be viewed as a very different way of pursuing higher education. Gastic and Verdugo (2013) explain that these ideas tend to go against what most recently immigrated families hold to be important, which is the home's collective effort for financial progress. This particular observation reinforces the belief that Latinx students place high importance on helping their families and provides at least one explanation for why they opt to stay close to home and attend their local community college. By taking this information into consideration when working with Latinx students, one can better understand the emphasis placed on *familismo* over individualism.

Therefore, we can begin to understand the aspects of the educational system that are conducive to guiding first-generation Latinx college students toward community colleges. Specifically, the financial and familial aspects of the decision-making processes that influence Latinx students in their pursuit of higher education. While these two factors affect many first-generation college students, the aforementioned articles indicate that it is especially prevalent with first-generation Latinx college students.

Cultural Deficit Versus Asset-Based Approaches

Having established the role that family and finances play in Latinx students' pursuit of higher education, I now shift my focus toward identifying the systemic barriers that are working against these students. These barriers exist in many different forms, from overtly discriminatory admissions procedures to more covert academic advising practices that preclude Latinx students from exploring all of their post-secondary options. In order to comprehend the variables working against Latinx students in the U. S.

American higher educational system, we must look at them through a lens that deciphers how and why these barriers are so effective. Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) may serve this purpose. While Critical Race Theory (CRT) looks to examine ways that societal factors oppress people based on racial factors, Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) takes this a step further by specifically addressing these issues from Latinx individuals' perspectives. Solorzano and Bernal (2001) explain that LatCrit lays the groundwork for understanding what institutions should consider when working with first-generation, Latinx college students.

One important factor that should be taken into consideration when researching students of color and education is that there are educators who, whether consciously or unconsciously, believe their students' cultural differences (i.e., non-white) serve as a handicap for them in the classroom (Rodriguez & Oseguera, 2015). Acknowledging this bias against communities of color is important, especially when institutions serve first-generation college students. The cultural deficit model (Salkind, 2008) offers an explanation for the low achievement rates of students of color. This model is often used by the dominant culture in an attempt to shift the blame towards minoritized students' cultures just being naturally deficient (p. 217). Such is the case when this concept is applied to the significantly low number of Latinx students on many college campuses. Gastic and Verdugo (2013) explain:

The cultural deficit model blames Mexican American culture for not only being inferior to the dominant culture, but also attributes the low educational achievement of Mexican American children to negative teaching and socialization in the Mexican American family. That is, the cultural practices and values found

in the Mexican American family are seen as negative factors in the school's evaluation of a Mexican American student's cultural capital. (p. 126)

This theory promotes the belief that some cultures are intrinsically inferior to others, and therefore, educators may conclude that there are not any issues to address with the educational system; instead, some cultures are just better positioned for academic success than others.

Such an approach allows those with privilege (i.e., those that benefit from the current structures) to reinforce such structures by publicly denying their very existence. If these inequalities are due to nature and not nurture, then conveniently, there are not any structural issues to address. Gastic and Verdugo (2013) continue by explaining:

However, the cultural deficit model fails to accept any external social factors that may hinder the child. Factors such as an inadequate educational system, low teacher expectations, schools that do not adequately prepare students for college, or even environmental factors that may produce a less than adequately prepared student are not taken into consideration. Instead, it is assumed that school systems are generally effective and that failures are due to a student's social and cultural attributes situated in their family. (p. 126)

This clarification helps to combat the cultural deficit model's explanation and exposes the external variables that impede many Latinx students from accessing higher education.

Gastic and Verdugo not only highlight this model's shortcomings, but also list out systemic inequities that collectively work to oppress students of color, including Latinx students. By pointing out the actual systems, structures, practices, and policies that sort and filter students, Gastic and Verdugo help discredit the dominant culture's notion of meritocracy—that all who want to succeed will do so if they put in the effort and work.

Gastic and Verdugo address the belief held by many educators that Latinx students are culturally and intellectually deficient. This idea is a common fallacy among classroom teachers when dealing with students who are bilingual and bicultural. Many teachers believe that since students are juggling two languages they are not truly prepared to succeed in their English-speaking classrooms (Geertz Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016).

Since it is documented that Latinx students are often viewed through a cultural deficit model, I will now demonstrate the ways that their cultures can be viewed as strengths for students. In fact, the LatCrit and Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) frameworks challenge the deficit perspective and embrace Latinx students' lived experiences as significant educational models. In addition to the challenges Latinx students face in the education system, they also encounter different home expectations than those typically associated with dominant culture: namely, additional responsibilities at home to support their families. With these added duties in working class families comes another level of intelligence that Paulo Freire says educators must acknowledge and value. Freire (1998) writes:

It's impossible to talk of respect for students for the dignity that is in the process of coming to be, for the identities that in the process of construction, without taking into consideration the conditions in which they are living and the importance of the knowledge derived from life experience, which they bring with them to school. (p. 62)

By taking these students' home lives into consideration, educators are then able to recognize the value of their real-life experiences. This approach will help dispel the myth that Latinx students are culturally and intellectually inferior, when compared to other

cultures. Achieving this requires a willingness to acknowledge that learning takes place outside of the traditional classroom setting, which then contributes to learning within the classroom.

While Freire introduced this method of validating students' life experiences as knowledge that can be incorporated into the classroom, more work has been done on the importance of this approach. Students' learning experiences outside of a teacher's instruction has also been referred to as acknowledging that students have many other funds of knowledge. "We use the term 'funds of knowledge' to refer to these historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 2009, p. 133). These other funds of knowledge validate students' experiences and bring to light the additional responsibilities that they are tasked with because of their working-class statuses. For example, many Latinx youth serve as the primary source of communication when dealing with outside agencies, specifically when the parents' English proficiency is limited.

A related observation, as well, is that children in the households are not passive bystanders, as they seem in the classrooms, but active participants in a broad range of activities mediated by these social relationships...In some cases, their participation is central to the household's functioning, as when the children contribute to the economic production of the home, or use their knowledge of English to mediate the household's communications with outside institutions, such as the school or government offices. (Moll et al., 2009, p. 134)

This clarifies how students' other funds of knowledge can help educators realize just how much of students' prior knowledge they can and should incorporate into their on-campus

interactions. With this explanation, one is able to understand the richness that many Latinx students encounter throughout their upbringing and how these experiences truly increase their abilities to acquire classroom knowledge.

Conclusion

All of these elements combined make up just a few of the challenges that Latinx students face as they attempt to achieve the same goals as their non-Latinx classmates. In this literature review I analyzed three bodies of literature related to Latinx student success: (a) Latinx students' barriers along the U.S. American educational pipeline, (b) Latinx students and community colleges, and (c) Latinx students and the cultural deficit model. Additionally, I looked at the theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and other aspects of the research process itself. My research was an effort to identify what first-generation, Latinx college students attributed as influential in achieving their intended educational goals, specifically at North Carolina community colleges. With this information I hope to disrupt existing inequities by providing a platform for these students to tell their stories in ways that reach North Carolina community college leaders.

As the Latinx population in North Carolina enters community colleges at expanding rates, these institutions are still not reflecting their communities, especially in the demographic makeup of their staff and faculty. In this dissertation, I examined the personal and institutional resources that Latinx students accessed in order to achieve their educational goals. The existing literature seems to be missing information regarding any initiatives or best practices occurring in North Carolina, so this study will bring about awareness of variables that are attracting and detracting first-generation, Latinx students

from attending North Carolina community colleges. This literature review demonstrates that the educational pipeline for Latinxs often functions more like a gauntlet than an unobstructed pathway. My research gained clarity about the challenges and forms of support that Latinx students have experienced during their time at community college, based on their own words and reflections.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I detail how I gathered the information needed to answer my research questions. The chapter begins by providing context for my research questions and specifically how they were the driving force for this work. This is followed by a description of how my experiences as a community college employee connect with the students that I interviewed. I then expand on the two theoretical frameworks that are used in this work—Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Community Cultural Wealth (CCW)—as well as how these frameworks lend themselves to the analysis I applied to students’ responses in the virtual paired depth interview sessions and one-on-one interviews. I end this chapter by explaining how I recruited the participants in this study as well as the data analysis processes that I followed to maintain the integrity of this research and of the students’ responses.

Research Questions

In the previous chapter, I explained how the existing literature demonstrates that Latinx students tend to have differing experiences than their white counterparts on community college campuses and that very little research has been done on this topic in North Carolina. Of the two studies that have been conducted in North Carolina community colleges, both works were quantitative studies that produced measurable data gathered from student surveys (see Alvarado, 2017; Perez Velez, 2018). Adding to that

work, this research is a basic qualitative study, which at the time of this dissertation, does not appear to have been done in North Carolina. This work provided a platform for the sharing of experiences and ideas by first-generation, Latinx community college students in North Carolina. In order to properly reflect students' experiences, I developed the following research questions:

- 1) How do first-generation, Latinx students in North Carolina navigate their community college experiences?
- 2) What personal and institutional factors do first-generation, Latinx community college students identify as important to achieving their intended educational goals?
- 3) Based on their experiences at community colleges, what recommendations do Latinx students have for institutional leaders?

The first question was intended to provide students with the opportunity to explain how, if at all, their status as first-generation college students has influenced their experiences on North Carolina community college campuses. The second question builds on the first by asking students to articulate the individual and institutional resources that have been instrumental in the pursuit of their academic goals. Any personal factors that students named were examined through the Community Cultural Wealth framework and the institutional factors were reviewed through the LatCrit framework, both of which are incorporated into this work. The third research question allowed students to individually, and collectively, reflect on their experiences and to provide detailed feedback for their campus leaders about recommendations to support future first-generation Latinx

community college students. This served as an opportunity for students to vividly depict their experiences and to communicate the changes, if any, that they would like to see implemented on their campuses to institutional leaders.

Conceptual Framework

As my research questions reflect, I view research as both political and subjective. In this conceptual framework section, I share my motivation and rationale, which is influenced by my own experiences as a Latino in higher education, both as a student and as a mid-level administrator. These aspects of my experiences form my identity and serve as a backdrop for this work. I continue by explaining the research paradigm and theoretical frameworks that helped me conduct this work. These particular components are important because they provided a lens for me to decipher and to interpret students' responses.

Professional Positionality Statement

While I previously shared my experiences as a student in the formal educational system (see Chapter I), I would now like to share my experiences as an employee at two North Carolina community colleges. I have been in the NC community college system for over 10 years, working directly with current and prospective Latinx students. My first role specifically focused on community outreach efforts, and my experience as a high school Spanish teacher afforded me the ability to focus on high school students. As a Latino, I was able to forge relationships with prospective Latinx students, which then carried over to their time as community college students. I was uniquely positioned in an outreach, enrollment, and academic advising role that allowed me to help students on

various levels. I began to notice that the majority of the students who stopped by my office were Latinx students that I had worked with throughout the enrollment process. While there were times when students needed enrollment and registration related information, they often stopped by just to chat. On a campus of nearly 300 full-time employees, there were only 4 Latinx employees: a cafeteria employee, an English as a Second Language instructor, a Spanish instructor, and I was the only Latinx admissions advisor. This meant that Latinx students were limited in seeing themselves reflected in the community college staff where they could interact with someone who looked like them.

This was also the case at my current institution where at the time that I was hired—I was the only full-time Latinx staff member, and there was also a Spanish instructor. I once again found myself in a student outreach position that allowed me to build relationships with prospective Latinx students while they were in high school. In my current role, I oversee a dual enrollment program that allows high school students to take tuition free courses, which in turn will save their families college or university tuition after high school. The college teaches some general education college transfer courses at local high schools, thus eliminating a transportation barrier for students. This program essentially removes two significant barriers in accessing higher education, but I have seen how its impact has been limited by high school personnel. For example, I visited a General Psychology course at a high school to help students log into their online accounts, and I was shocked to learn that all 28 students in this course were white students, despite the school having large Latinx and African-American student

populations. This example demonstrates that despite major barriers being removed for students to access higher education, there were still gatekeepers uniquely positioned to essentially determine who would benefit from certain opportunities.

I share these aspects of my professional experience because they serve as a backdrop for the professional work that I have done with Latinx community college students and the academic research that I conducted. My advocacy for Latinx students has revolved around my own observations of policies and procedures. This research serves as another dimension in my effort to understand and support Latinx students because it allowed me to hear directly from first-generation Latinx students about how they navigate their experiences at three North Carolina community colleges.

Research Paradigm

In order to make meaning of this work, I used a critical paradigm. Hatch (2002) explains its ontology as:

For critical theorists and feminists, the material world is made up of historically situated structures that have a real impact on the life chances of individuals. These structures are perceived to be real (i.e., natural and immutable), and social action resulting from their perceived realness leads to differential treatment of individuals based on race, gender, and social class. (p.16)

This explanation establishes that an individual's perception of their reality is determined by socially constructed identity categories, including socioeconomic status and race. A critical paradigm serves as a way to examine any institutional structures that students identified as influential in the pursuit of their educational goals. This work created an opportunity for us to learn from students how their statuses as first-generation Latinx

community college students have impacted their experiences on campus. Through the virtual interview sessions, I learned from students about any aspects of their campus experiences that may have been impacted by their Latinx identities. Hatch (2002) continues by explaining its epistemology as “knowledge within this set of assumptions is subjective and inherently political” and how “in this worldview, it is assumed that knowledge is always mediated through the political positionings of the researcher” (p. 16). Hatch’s explanation is important to this work because I understand how deeply rooted politically charged policies are within higher education in North Carolina. Seeing the limitations of placed Latinx students in the General Psychology course I visited compelled me to do this work to limit its perpetuation. My role as a researcher going into this work was influenced by my position as a community college administrator and the political aspects of higher education that I have encountered. Specifically, my experiences have taught me that institutions interpret policies differently and in turn, implement procedures that affect students accordingly.

While the ontological and epistemological components of the critical paradigm are essential to this work, the methodology is just as significant. Hatch (2002) writes,

One of the purposes of this kind of inquiry is to raise the consciousness of those being oppressed because of historically situated structures tied to race, gender, and class. With raising consciousness comes providing understandings that lead to social change. (p. 17)

Given the educational landscape depicted by the existing literature in the previous chapter, this work provided a platform where participants identified personal and institutional resources that contributed to achieving their educational goals. Thus,

participants' responses could very well help future Latinx students navigate their community college experiences. My desire to disrupt the status quo and to bring about change for first-generation, Latinx, community college students contributed to how I interpreted students' responses.

Theoretical Frameworks

In order to understand first-generation, Latinx, community college students' experiences in the formal educational pipeline I used LatCrit and Community Cultural Wealth as my theoretical frameworks.

LatCrit Theory

Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) are credited with establishing LatCrit theory and identify the following five themes: 1) the centrality of race and racism and intersectionality with other forms of subordination, 2) the challenge to dominant ideology, 3) the commitment to social justice, 4) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and 5) the interdisciplinary perspective. These themes were useful in understanding Latinx students' experiences in higher education. Within the first theme, the authors explain that "similar to LatCrit scholars, we argue further that class and racial oppression cannot account for oppression based on gender, language, or immigration status" (p. 313). These particular aspects make up such an important part of an individual's identity that they, too, must be incorporated into students' experiences in education. Specifically, my work heard from students on how these aspects of their identities influenced their experiences on their campuses. Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) expand on the challenge to dominant ideology by explaining:

A CRT and LatCrit framework in education challenges the traditional claims of the educational system to objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity. Critical race and LatCrit theorists also challenge the predominant deficit frameworks used to explain Chicana and Chicano educational inequality. (p. 313)

Applied to education, LatCrit challenges the belief that the existing aspects of the formal educational system work for everyone. LatCrit combats the cultural deficit model that is too often used to justify inequalities that exist for communities of color and in this case, for first-generation Latinx community college students.

Solorzano and Delgado Bernal's (2001) LatCrit framework is commitment to social justice and is explained as "envision[ing] a social justice research agenda that leads toward (a) the elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty and (b) the empowering of underrepresented minority groups" (p. 313). LatCrit emphasizes the importance of students' lived experiences.

In fact, CRT and LatCrit educational studies view this knowledge as a strength and draw explicitly on the lived experiences of the students of color by including such methods as storytelling, family history, biographies, scenarios, parables, *testimonios*, *cuentos*, *consejos*, chronicles, and narratives. (p. 314)

The LatCrit framework helps researchers challenge the status quo, or dominant, narrative by lifting up the lived experiences of students of color. Geertz Gonzalez and Morrison (2016) incorporated LatCrit into their non-empirical study of the Latinx experience in education and found:

LatCrit provides a framework that calls into question the disconnect of students of color from their race, ethnicity, and culture in post-secondary settings.

Furthermore, it highlights the importance of cultural contexts and knowledge in analysis, particularly within learning spaces. Education serves as a site of tension for students of color because of its ability to expand opportunity on one hand and create oppressive situations on the other. (p. 91)

This reality is important to my work because while community colleges pride themselves on leveling the playing field in regard to accessing higher education, they may simultaneously present challenges for students of color. Rodriguez and Oseguera (2015) utilized LatCrit as a foundation and expanded their study of Latinx students' experiences on college campuses:

Institutional culture across the educational pipeline can refer to the social climate within the institution (i.e., social groupings, affinity groups, who have access to the opportunity structure), the normative beliefs and practices across the institution (i.e., presence or absence of student voice, the normative beliefs about who 'deserves' to succeed), and the modes of communication and interactions among the various people within an institution (i.e., whether teachers/faculty believe that it is their job to motivate students or not). (p. 132)

My research embraced these approaches by examining the ways in which Latinx students articulated their lived experiences as influential in their ability to navigate higher education. This framework allowed me to consider students' responses in light of the systemic, institutional practices that may be preparing or precluding students from achieving their educational goals. All of these components of LatCrit were essential to my work and provided an explicit way for me to analyze how Latinx students described their experiences at three North Carolina community colleges.

Community Cultural Wealth (CCW)

While LatCrit acknowledges existing inequities within the formal educational system, Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework highlights the various ways that students call upon resources outside of the institution to combat those inequities. CCW challenges the typical cultural deficit model, whereby "minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: (a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and (b) parents neither value nor support their child's education" (p. 75). The deficit model overtly blames students' home lives for their lack of academic success within the formal education system, which then reinforces the belief that the system works. If that is the case, then there is not a need for institutional reform, and instead, the focus is turned to student and familial reform.

The notion of culture equating to types of wealth stems from Bourdieu's cultural capital theory. Yosso (2005) explains:

According to Bourdieu, cultural capital refers to an accumulation of cultural knowledge, skills and abilities possessed and inherited by privileged groups in society. Bourdieu asserts that cultural capital (i.e., education, language), social capital (i.e., social networks, connections) and economic capital (i.e., money and other material possessions) can be acquired two ways, from one's family and/or through formal schooling. The dominant groups within society are able to maintain power because access is limited to acquiring and learning strategies to use these forms of capital for social mobility. (p.76)

Bourdieu's theory explains that being born into established privileged groups and obtaining a formal education are ways for individuals to maintain their socioeconomic

advantage. Birth and education limit if and when those outside of the established social order are able to disrupt that order and to achieve a higher social status.

However, Yosso believes that obtaining a formal education is not the only way for those born outside of privileged groups to have their knowledge validated; there are other sources of knowledge that are just as valuable for communities of color. Yosso expands on cultural capital to include aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital as other forms of capital that should be recognized. Yosso (2005) explains:

Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This resiliency is evidenced in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals. (p. 77)

Aspirational capital is important to first-generation college students who often find themselves navigating the complexities of higher education without having formally recognized resources at home to call upon. This is especially true for some Latinx students whose families may not be as proficient in English and, therefore, are limited in their level of direct support (e.g., FAFSA, academic advising). Yet, despite what could be perceived as a barrier, these parents offer an abundance of indirect support, which is what CCW attempts to highlight.

In fact, Yosso (2005) identifies language as a source of capital for Latinx students:

Linguistic capital reflects the idea that Students of Color arrive at school with multiple language and communication skills. In addition, these children most often have been engaged participants in a storytelling tradition, that may include listening to and recounting oral histories, parable, stories (*cuentos*) and proverbs (*dichos*). This repertoire of storytelling skills may include memorization, attention to detail, dramatic pauses, comedic timing, facial affect, vocal tone, volume, rhythm and rhyme. (p. 78)

Yosso shifts the narrative. While a traditional perspective about families where English is not spoken by the parents might be described as a linguistically deficient home lacking a grasp of standard English, linguistic capital counters the narrative toward one that acknowledges and empowers the students' abilities to express themselves in multiple languages. This different approach validates students' home lives and their parents' roles as valuable educators who provide students with rich abilities for expression and learning.

Linguistic capital and the role of the home connects with familial capital, which is explained as "those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" (p. 79). This places emphasis on a connection and source of capital that is derived from one's family and respective community.

Yosso (2005) continues to emphasize the role that one's community plays by explaining how social capital is used to create social networks and link individuals to community resources:

Scholars note that historically, People of Color have utilized their social capital to attain education, legal justice, employment and healthcare. In turn, these Communities of Color gave the information and resources they gained through these institutions back to their social networks. (p. 79)

Establishing one's social network is critical for many communities and, in this case, lends itself to the gathering and sharing of essential resources that one may not otherwise find.

Social capital connects with what Yosso terms navigational capital, which "refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind" (p. 80). Both social and navigational capital appear to serve as resources outside of a traditional resource center and demonstrate how historically marginalized communities have improvised and found alternatives to parameters placed on them by the dominant culture. Yosso's framework also includes resistant capital that is described as "knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (p. 80). Within the context of this work, resistant capital is exhibited when one is essentially resisting against any oppressive factors that serve as obstacles in higher education.

Rodriguez, Martinez, and Valle (2016) incorporated CCW into their study of Latinx educational leaders and found:

Yosso's Community Cultural explains the success of Chicana/o college students through their diverse experiences in having to navigate and negotiate spaces and people that created greater challenges to their academic progress. In instances when teachers did not believe in the success of the student, Chicana/o students set out to disprove deficit thinking using resistance capital. (p. 140)

This is important to my research because it addresses the barriers that Chicana/o students faced in higher education but highlights their determination to overcome these obstacles. Perez Huber (2009) incorporated CCW in her qualitative research on ten undocumented students to learn about the challenges they faced in pursuing higher education and the

resources they accessed. “The women in this study show that it is because of the social resources present in their families and communities that they are able to continue their undergraduate careers” (p. 718). This is important because it reinforces the importance of off-campus resources that Latinx students utilize in order to achieve their educational goals.

Kanagala et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study with forty-seven Latinx students to focus on asset-based approaches to understanding their experiences and used CCW as a starting point. Through their research, they expanded on the six sources of capital within the original CCW framework and added *Ganas*/Perseverant Wealth, Ethnic Consciousness Wealth, Spiritual/Faith-Based Wealth, and Pluriversal Wealth as additional strengths found within Latinx students. *Ganas*/Perseverant Wealth is defined as:

Determination, self-reliance, and inner confidence underlie this *ventaja*. Students refused to quit, and they also recognized and embraced the sacrifices they made in going to college. Admirably, students were able to overcome difficult challenges such as being undocumented, lacking role models and mentors in their communities, experiencing poverty, and attending poorly resourced schools. (Kanagala et al.)

This explanation highlights the fact that Latinx students find their determination, resilience, and drive to overcome challenges from personal factors. Ethnic Consciousness Wealth also serves as a source of strength for students in that, “This ethnic consciousness manifested in students’ deep commitment to give back to their families and communities and in their sense that personal accomplishment could benefit the Latino/a collective whole” (Kanagala et al.). Through ethnic consciousness wealth, students find purpose and

encouragement from giving back to their homes and communities in order to benefit others. These two particular sources of wealth found within Latinx students' cultures will be expanded on in the subsequent chapters. Kanagala et al.'s four additional sources of capital and wealth provide more opportunities for educators and researchers to acknowledge more of the strengths that students bring with them onto college campuses.

In looking at the components of LatCrit and CCW, it is evident that both theories align with and guide my research. LatCrit helped me to interpret students' responses on whether there were institutional factors that have facilitated or precluded their paths toward their educational goals. CCW provided a lens for me to emphasize how students were able to call upon non-traditional resources outside of academia to ensure their successes. With the use of these theories, this research strived to collect and convey first-generation, Latinx, community college students' experiences at North Carolina community colleges in ways that demonstrate their ability to successfully pursue and achieve their educational goals.

Methods

In an effort to accurately depict first-generation, Latinx, community college students' experiences in North Carolina I conducted a basic qualitative study. Merriam (1988) explains the purpose of a basic qualitative study as "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to *understand* how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (p. 23). Merriam's explanation aligns with my research goals in that I learned how first-generation Latinx community college students in North

Carolina make meaning of their experiences on campus. A basic qualitative study allowed me to hear from students on how they interpreted their interactions at their respective institutions. This work provided a space for students to describe their experiences on college campuses as well as disclose institutional and personal resources that have influenced their academic goals.

Virtual Interview Method

As part of this basic qualitative research project, given the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on education, my research consisted of virtual paired depth interviews and virtual individual interviews with a total of 12 students at three community colleges that are centrally located in North Carolina. The initial plan was to solely conduct focus group interviews but due to scheduling conflicts or students not showing up to their scheduled focus group interviews, some interviews resulted in paired depth interviews and there was also an option for individual interviews. I conducted three virtual paired depth interview meetings and six virtual individual interviews for a total of nine interviews. This format allowed me to include as many student participants as possible to gain a better understanding of their experiences. I prepared six interview questions (see appendix A) to initiate conversations during the virtual interview sessions, and students' responses generated additional discussions amongst the participants.

One of the benefits of the paired depth interview format is that “the two interviewees usually will remain on topic or at least not stray too far, in comparison to when there are more than two interviewees who could take the conversation in many directions” (Wilson et al., 2016, p. 1554). Since I did not know the participants, these

sessions served to build rapport within the group and with me as well. Additionally, students' individual responses within our sessions triggered memories for the other participants during the member check sessions and in turn, strengthened students' stories. I then compared students' responses across the three institutions and documented their stories in a way that does not appear to have been done before in North Carolina.

Sampling

I begin this section by explaining the reasons for convenience sampling, which were the existing professional relationships that I had at the institutions where I conducted this work. I then explain the participant recruitment efforts that I made at each of the three institutions for this research.

Identifying the Community Colleges

In my current administrative role, I have attended a few professional development sessions where I connected with individuals who have taken an interest in my research. I met one individual at Bridge Community College at a Latinx-focused conference at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill in 2019, and this person mentioned that they would be happy to help me with my work. This individual had coordinated a student panel for the conference and mentioned that they could help find Latinx student participants who would be willing to share their stories. This was important because it allowed me to learn from first-generation Latinx students who attend one of the larger community colleges in North Carolina. I recently met with a colleague from Alliance Community College who asked about my dissertation topic, and they were excited to learn about my research. This person mentioned that they would be happy to help me in

my research as they have noticed a change in their campus demographics, which reflects an increasingly larger Latinx student body. This college's participation is also important because it is a mid-size community college whose county has both urban and rural components as well as a growing Latinx population. The third college where I conducted interviews was Partnership Community College, which is also a mid-size community college whose service area comprises urban and rural aspects. Although this may be a convenience sample based on my professional networks, I also selected these campuses because they represent three different campuses whose respective communities consist of a growing Latinx population. This cross section of community college campuses allowed me to understand the common themes expressed by participants on a larger scale than just on their respective campuses.

Student Recruitment

I worked with campus liaisons to help recruit student participants and I asked these colleagues to send out recruitment emails to their students who identified as Latinx. The three colleges were able to generate a report based on students who identified as Hispanic or Latinx on their admission applications and I asked them to filter out all dual enrollment students and those who were not 18 years old to avoid minors participating in this study. I felt that it was important for all students to be heard but for the purpose of this study and for the IRB application, I did not include an age-based sensitive population. A total of 1,783 students received my recruitment email and of those, 12 students volunteered to participate in this study (see Appendix B). All 12 of the students were from working class families and they all held at least a part-time job during their

time as college students. There were three first-year students in this study and the others were in at least their second year at their respective community colleges. Once the 12 participants were recruited, I sent out a doodle poll and a Google form to coordinate the virtual interviews to accommodate students' schedules at each institution.

Student Introductions

There were six participants who attend Alliance Community College, four participants who attend Bridge Community College, and two participants who attend Partnership Community College. I will now provide a brief overview of each participant, which will then be expanded throughout the subsequent chapters.

Rey is 39 years old and is a first-year student who enrolled at Alliance Community College after spending time in the military. She is married with two children and works a part-time job off-campus to help with her family's finances. Rey's mother dreamt of becoming a nurse but set her goals aside to care for her children. After high school, Rey considered enrolling in a nursing program but stated that she lacked the self-confidence to do so. However, Rey is now taking the pre-requisite courses for admission into the nursing program at Alliance.

Juliet is 19 years old and is in her second year at Alliance Community College but is in the first year of her health science program. Juliet applied to and was accepted to several universities in North Carolina but could not obtain the financial aid required to pay for the higher tuition rates. Juliet tried to enroll at Alliance directly after high school but also faced many financial challenges in affording her education, so she took a semester off and worked as a nursing assistant at a hospital. Despite this challenge, Juliet

gained admission into a health science program that is competitive and admits less than 20 students in each incoming cohort.

Luna is 19 years old and is in the first year of the same competitive health science program as Juliet at Alliance Community College. Luna graduated from the early college program at Alliance and rather than transferring off to a four-year college, decided to stay close to her family and to re-enroll at Alliance. Luna is the oldest of two children and joined our scheduled interview while she traveled in a vehicle helping her father run errands. This is of note because it speaks to her willingness to contribute to my research while also keeping a commitment she had made to her father.

Virginia is 45 years old and is in the third year at Alliance Community College. Virginia married after high school and her spouse was in the military, so she spent several years caring for her family. Virginia has a daughter in high school who required learning accommodations and began doubting her ability to go to college so Virginia enrolled at Alliance to show her daughter that if Virginia could go to college while juggling part-time work and full-time family responsibilities, then her daughter could be successful in college.

Yessica is 23 years old and is in the last year of a health science program at Alliance Community College. Yessica also attended the early college program at Alliance but was unsure of her eventual career plans, so she spent four years working full-time at a fast-food restaurant while she figured that out. Yessica then re-enrolled at Alliance and was admitted into a different health science program than Juliet and Luna but is also competitive and admits fewer than 20 students per year.

Crystal is 23 years old and is in the last year of a second associate degree from Alliance Community College. Crystal works full-time and participated in a virtual interview while on her lunch break. Crystal is the oldest of two children and while she initially considered attending a university, decided to stay at home to help her family out financially.

Juan is 20 years old as in his second year of a technology related program at Bridge Community College. Juan attended an arts based high school that prides itself on its competitiveness and its ability to send graduates to prestigious universities across the country. While that may be the case for many of their graduates, Juan is a DACA recipient, has limited legal status in the United States, and did not receive academic and financial planning assistance from high school. Juan was accepted to several universities in North Carolina and other states but could only afford to attend Bridge.

Bianca is 21 years old as in her third year of a language and community health program at Bridge Community College. Bianca is an undocumented student and while the lack of legal status precludes her from becoming a nurse, she found an alternative solution to this situation. Bianca is the oldest of 3 children and is very involved in various community organizations.

Lily is 22 years old and is in the second year of a college transfer degree at Bridge Community College. Lily is the oldest female child in her family and takes great pride in her gender and in her status as the first in her family to go to college. She plans to enter the law enforcement field to directly challenge the limited female and Latinx representation that she has observed in her community.

Carla is 21 years old and is in the first year of a college transfer degree at Bridge Community College. Carla is still unsure of her eventual major but is considering business since it is broad and will lend itself to several careers. Carla lives in North Carolina with her mother while her father and brother remain in Costa Rica.

Samantha is 28 years old and is in her first year at Partnership Community College after spending several years in the military. Samantha lives with her mother and daughter, which serve as motivation for her to complete her college degree. As we began our first interview, Samantha experienced internet connection issues and volunteered to travel to a coffee shop amidst COVID-19 restrictions. She ended up going to her neighbor's house in order to meet with me, which speaks to her willingness to share her story with me.

Frida is 38 years old as in her fifth year at Partnership Community College. Frida is taking the pre-requisite courses for admission into a competitive nursing program that only admits 40 students per year. Frida worked full-time while taking these courses and came across scheduling conflicts, so she recently stopped working to expedite the completion of the required coursework. Frida is married and has a son, which also serve as motivation and support while she strives to reach her goal of becoming a nurse.

Operationalizing the Data Collection

Since COVID-19 has affected interpersonal interactions, I used Zoom to conduct the virtual interviews. I recorded all of the virtual interviews and uploaded them to UNCG's Box service to store students' interviews. This allowed me to save information on a secure server and my faculty advisor, a peer reviewer, and I were the only people

with access to the recordings. The video recordings allowed me to transcribe the interviews, which then guided me as I coded the students' responses. The six individual interviews each lasted for at least one hour and the three paired depth interviews each lasted for at least 1.5 hours. In an effort to gather as much information as possible, I also took field notes of individuals' responses and body language during the virtual interviews.

Data Analysis

As I looked back through all of the data that was collected, I needed to be mindful of my personal and professional experiences as they related to students' responses. As such, I took a political analysis approach to this work. Hatch (2002) explains political analysis as:

The overall intent is to provide a framework that builds in analytic integrity so that findings are grounded in data while acknowledging the political nature of the real world and the research act. A more specific goal is to give critical/feminist researchers tools for doing data analysis that fit within the assumptions that characterize their perspective. (p. 191)

This explanation helped me understand the political component connection between the critical paradigm, which has a political component as does my research topic as I coded the data. I also incorporated a narrative analysis as I review the participants' responses. Glesne (2015) explains that "the narrative analyst looks at how the interviewee links experiences and circumstances together to make meaning, realizing also that circumstances do not determine how the story will be told or the meaning that is made of

it” (p. 186). This is important to my work because participants explained how unique aspects of their identities were forged within their educational experiences.

The initial round of coding consisted of in vivo coding and Saldaña (2009) describes in vivo coding as “taken directly from what the participant...says” (p.3). I chose this method for the first round of coding because: a) I wanted students’ responses to guide my analysis in a more organic form and, b) the personal and professional connection to my work would be removed since the codes extracted would be verbatim from the participants’ responses. The second round of coding was an inductive analysis to help me move from the in vivo codes as I tried to find patterns and create categories from students’ responses. Saldaña (2015) explains this as:

The process by which answers to research questions are emergently constructed as more and more data are collected and systematically examined. These answers can take various forms, ranging from...major categories or themes that seem prominent in the data to an extended narrative explanation of why things happened as they did. (p. 26)

During this round of coding, I extracted the most salient quotes from each interview, compiled them into a master document, and then did a free write of the most important topics from the 87 quotes from the interviews. This inductive writing process was extremely helpful for me because I was able to organize the major points from all of the first round interviews and then find the categories that connected with students’ responses. The free write resulted in four, single spaced pages where I weaved together the connections between students’ experiences. It was through this process that I was then able to create a master list of 21 codes; six of which stemmed from the community

cultural wealth framework, 11 came from the interview questions, and four from the research questions. I then went back through all of the interviews with a deductive analysis approach for a third round of coding and I applied these 21 codes to the students' experiences. As I went through this deductive analysis process, I coded the information based on the six components of CCW as students' responses demonstrated a form of capital within the framework. I wrote analytical memos throughout this analytical process in order to be mindful of how I engaged with and made meaning of students' responses (Saldaña, 2011, p.98). I made sure to write a reflexive statement immediately after each interview concluded to help me take note of any verbal cues that may not be noticeable during the transcribing or coding phases. I would also write an analytic memo the following day once I had time to process the interviews and I would take notes on any additional reflections that came to mind.

Once the first round of interviews and three rounds of coding were complete, I sent out follow up emails to the participants to schedule the member check sessions. Of the 12 participants, I was able to coordinate member check interviews with eight students. I planned to only hold focus group member check sessions but coordinating students' schedules once again proved to be a challenge. One session consisted of two students, a second session included four students, and there were two individual interviews with students whose schedules did not allow for them to meet with others. I began the member check sessions by sharing an infographic (see Appendix C) that contained their responses and how they connected with the community cultural wealth framework. This provided a backdrop for the students to understand how I was analyzing

the various aspects of their experiences. I then shared a second infographic (see Appendix D) with students that listed out how their responses aligned with those from all three community colleges. This allowed students to engage with the data analysis on both micro and macro levels, while also maintaining the integrity of their responses.

Ethics

A critical component of this work was for me to be fully aware of how my lived experiences connected with or differed from those described by the Latinx students participating in this study. The reason that drew me to this work was that I experienced feelings of isolation on my undergraduate campus, and I needed to be mindful that I did not project my own feelings onto their responses. While the ethical component was important to this work, it was just as important to the individuals who participated in each of the interviews. I understood that I had to be honest and transparent with the participants about the purpose of my research in order to build rapport with the students and thus, for them to open up to me. I began each virtual session with a brief explanation of my personal and professional experiences as a way for students to understand what brought me to this work. I was cautious with what I shared so that my experiences did not influence students' responses, but I thought that they should know my own connection to the research. The hope was that this built a sense of solidarity with the participants and in turn, students would learn to trust me. I was also cognizant as I informed students of my professional responsibilities that also influence my research. This, too, was important so that my roles as a Latinx student and a mid-level administrator did not interfere or intimidate students. I was aware that my status as a doctoral student may be interpreted as

a privileged status, so I was extremely careful as I strove to establish and maintain trust amongst the participants.

In order to maintain the integrity of this work, I incorporated a peer reviewer once I had transcribed the interviews and began the coding process. The peer reviewer and I met seven times for at least 1.5 hours each time throughout the coding processes. We did this to ensure that the participants' responses were accurately conveyed in this work. The peer reviewer was trained in qualitative research and holds a Ph.D. in Cultural Foundations. I also had my dissertation chair review the coding of my data as another layer of consistency and authenticity. In my extensive search, I did not find a similar study in North Carolina, so I was fully aware of what was at stake and the ethical components of this work were critical to the integrity of this research and to the students' voices.

Strengths and Limitations of the Research

As I prepared to conduct this research, I was aware of the variables that may influence the progression and outcomes of this work. One of the strengths that I possessed going into this work was that I am a first-generation college student who had to navigate the college enrollment process without a formally recognized resource at home to call upon. I had to use an informal network of high school teachers to help me understand the questions that I needed to ask. I believe that having to utilize these resources outside of academia afforded me the understanding of what the existing literature depicts as critical to Latinx students' academic success, as well as it aligned with my theoretical frameworks. Being bilingual and bicultural allowed me to be viewed

as an insider and member of the Latinx students' respective communities, which made our virtual space more conducive for students to share their experiences with me. I incorporated code-switching in my introduction to students to establish that doing so was not only possible but that it was welcomed. My experience as a community college employee also provided credibility with students as far as the professional driving force behind this work. I was genuinely excited to hear how students described their experiences at North Carolina community colleges as well as the recommendations that they had for institutions to better serve future Latinx students.

While I am aware that the personal and professional experiences that drew me to this work may serve as strengths, I understood that they may also serve as blind spots for me. I acknowledge that my lived experiences may differ from those of the participants, and I was extremely careful that I did not project my own experiences onto students' responses as I transcribed and coded their interviews. Another limitation was that there were 1,783 students that received my recruitment email and only 12 students participated in the virtual interview sessions. Mathematically speaking, that may not seem like a large sample, but I do not want that to take away from the time that these 12 students volunteered out of their busy lives to share their stories with me. This concern is exactly why I used a campus liaison to help me recruit Latinx students to share their experiences through the virtual focus group sessions. I am also aware that only conducting virtual interviews at three community colleges in the central region of the state may be viewed as a geographic limitation. However, I intentionally chose a large, and two mid-level community colleges to capture students' experiences at institutions of various sizes.

Therefore, despite the aforementioned limitations, I proceeded with my research in order to incorporate Latinx students' voices as a source of empowerment for future first-generation college students.

Conclusion

As I have stated throughout this document, the purpose of this work was to learn from first-generation, Latinx, community college students in North Carolina how their time at their institutions has impacted the achievement of their educational goals. In order to learn this, I conducted semi-structured virtual individual and virtual paired depth interviews at a large and two mid-size community colleges in the central part of the state. The purpose of the virtual sessions was for students to help me answer the following research questions:

- 1) How do first-generation Latinx community college students navigate their community college experiences?
- 2) What personal and institutional factors do first-generation Latinx community college students identify as important to achieving their intended educational goals?
- 3) Based on their experiences at North Carolina community colleges, what suggestions do Latinx students have for institutional leaders?

These questions were carefully crafted so that students' experiences remained the focus throughout this work. In the next chapter, I will discuss precisely how students' experiences and their responses answered the aforementioned research questions. The timing of this research aligns with a demographic shift resulting in a continuously

increasing Latinx population in North Carolina (Carolina Demography, 2019). This research could also influence a state initiative through the newly formed myFutureNC organization that aims to increase higher educational attainment for North Carolina citizens by 2 million people by the year 2030 (myFutureNC, 2019). I intend for this research to contribute to how these two phenomena collectively impact educational access for many North Carolinians through community colleges, specifically for first-generation Latinx college students.

CHAPTER IV

INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS THAT CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT LATINX STUDENTS

At that point, we become a statistic. We grow the statistics of Latinos that don't go to college after high school. That makes me mad because we become a statistic because of the system. It makes life harder, and we continue the decades of being the workhorse of the U.S. in labor intensive jobs. (Juan)

As previously mentioned in Chapter 2, there are variables that tend to attract first-generation Latinx college students to community colleges. In this study, I interviewed 12 students from three community colleges and heard directly from them about the ways that their colleges have positively and negatively influenced their experiences as they establish and progress toward their educational goals. I begin this chapter by explaining the challenges that students identified as obstacles that they have had to overcome on their campuses, sometimes without accessing formally recognized resources. I then present the ways that students named specific employees or services on campus that were encouraging and supportive for them. I end this chapter by sharing the specific recommendations that students indicated for community colleges to enhance the ways that they serve Latinx students. The categories are presented in this order to understand the challenging situations that community colleges have presented for Latinx students' experiences, as evidenced by Juan's response. I then recognize the existing practices that

are supporting Latinx students and end the chapter with students' recommendations for expanding these best practices. This chapter focuses on the aspects of the formal educational pipeline and its impact on Latinx community college students. The LatCrit framework guided my analysis of students' responses to my interview and research questions that I will now expand on.

Institutional Challenges

In this section, I list the challenges that students identified during their interactions when becoming community college students. The first aspect of the formal pipeline that students named was the guidance, or lack thereof, received as they were graduating from high school. Students then explained how affording their college education, even though the typically cost-efficient community college system, was a challenge for their families. Once students were enrolled, they expressed trouble accessing formal career services on their campuses. The last component that students articulated as a challenge was the lack of cultural representation in college employees on their campuses and how that presented a challenge for them.

Leaving High School

Nunez et. Al. (2011) established that Latinx students tend to begin their academic studies at community colleges, and while community colleges often pride themselves on being easily accessible for students, several students in this study indicated feeling otherwise. Five students from all three of the community colleges in this study specifically expressed that the enrollment process was difficult for them and that they did not receive personalized help from any employees. Looking back at their experiences,

students mentioned that this was the case for them about school employees as they were leaving high school as well as from the community colleges where they were enrolling. Although this study did not focus on the high school aspect of students' experiences at community colleges, it is important to note that Latinx students did not experience personalized help at that point in their academic journey. Juliet, who attends Alliance Community College, looked back at her high school experience, and stated:

I also spot the difference because I took AP and honors classes, and I would pretty much be the only Hispanic or minority. And then I would see how Hispanics at another high school close to me were all capable of going to universities because they got the help from their advisors on how to enroll. But I wasn't able to because they weren't really mindful of my situation in high school. So, I also felt like that was a big disadvantage that I had that these other people didn't.

Juliet is speaking to a certain part of the educational pipeline where Latinx students, who may want to follow the traditional route that non-Latinx students tend to progress through, are often diverted from it. This served as a backdrop for Juliet as she had the same experience with Alliance as she was trying to enroll, which is expanded on in the next section of this chapter.

As indicated in Juan's quote at the beginning of the chapter, he also experienced a challenging situation as he was graduating from high school. Juan explained it as:

We had kids from my very competitive high school going to Harvard, Yale, Penn State, you know, all these Ivy league schools. On top of that I graduated in the top 10% and just to give you some statistical information, everyone in the top 10% of that class for that year went to an Ivy league school with the exception of one person. That person was me.

Juan's response indicates that although he academically excelled in high school, he experienced a disparity in the level of support that he received from high school employees when compared to his classmates. Crystal expressed having a similar experience at her high school when she shared, "my high school didn't tell me what options I had so I ended up going to Alliance."

The lack of college planning and guidance that Juliet, Juan, and Crystal experienced can be attributed to what Madrigal-Garcia & Acevedo-Gil (2016) identified as Latinx students not being presented with all of their academic options when leaving high school. This is reflected in how high school personnel limited these Latinx students' opportunities to explore all of their higher educational options. Their experiences present a precarious component of the formal pipeline where students may lose agency over their ability to progress through it. This essentially perpetuates the "system" and "statistics" that Juan referenced of Latinx students not obtaining college degrees.

Finding Ways to Pay for College

One critical aspect of the enrollment process where students expressed concerns about not receiving the personalized help that they needed was finding ways to afford their education. Learning about scholarships, grants, and payment plans was a challenge indicated by six of the students from all three community colleges in this study. This particular component of obtaining a college degree, coupled with the lack of personalized help, contributed to additional consternation in what was already a stressful situation for students. Juliet, who observed the absence of support from her high school advisor as she applied to colleges, encountered a lack of support by community college staff as well

once she was accepted. She explained that despite asking for help in person, by phone, and by email, she could never get the specific guidance that she needed:

I'm also learning for the first time, trying to apply by myself and I'm like, I don't know how to do this, I don't know how to do that. I was actually working too, and I was just like, I got so much going on and I just didn't do it. I ended up taking a semester off after high school because I couldn't get the financial aid that I needed. It was too late to ask my dad for the money to pay for college. So, I was just like, we'll just take the semester off and we'll try again in January.

So, rather than continuing to get the run around from her college's Financial Aid Department, Juliet decided to step away from school for what would have been her first semester in college after graduating from high school. Instead, Juliet continued to work at her full-time job and delayed her enrollment until the following spring semester. Juliet's experience demonstrates how even at an entirely different institution from her high school, she faced the same lack of guidance from educators whose responsibilities required them to do so.

Juliet's experience was not an isolated incident amongst the participants in this study. Frida, who attends Partnership Community College, responded that aside from the FAFSA, she had trouble finding institutional scholarships to help pay for her education. Frida stated:

I'm a self-paying student. When I worked, I saved the money to pay for school and now I'm going to have to get a loan to get into the nursing program. And that's a challenge, how to pay for school because I do not qualify for a few scholarships. There are ones that you have to be young, like age is very important. I'm almost 40, so I don't qualify for those types of help.

Frida worked full-time while applying to the nursing program, but her work hours limited her ability to take the courses that are required to get into the program. So, she decided to stop working in order to pursue her plans of becoming a nurse. However, the trade-off was that she lost her income and the additional funds to help cover her tuition expenses. Despite there being scholarships available for students, she noticed that most of them were designed for recent high school graduates and given her age, she did not qualify for that type of aid. So, Frida felt that her only option moving forward was to take out student loans at her community college. This particular story is concerning because it contradicts the affordability and the ease of access that community colleges tout as their benefits for students. This is evidenced by a section of the North Carolina Community College System Office's mission statement that reads, "The mission of the North Carolina Community College System is to open the door to high-quality, accessible educational opportunities that minimize barriers to post-secondary education" (NCCCS).

Bianca and Juan shared that their lack of full legal citizenship status limited their ability to even access scholarships, grants, or student loans. Juan is a DACA recipient, which grants him limited legal status and Bianca is an undocumented student. Given their legal statuses, both students are required to pay out-of-state tuition, which on average, is three times the amount of in-state tuition rates. While the community college mission promotes their affordability and accessibility, the out-of-state tuition amount becomes more than a mere obstacle but instead, serves as a deterrent for students to even consider its feasibility. In light of this financial challenge, both Bianca and Juan had to revisit their course loads and their employment statuses in order to pay for their education. At one

point, Juan worked a full-time and a part-time job to be able to afford the out-of-state tuition expense because “that was my smack in the face by reality number two. Yes, community college is cheap, way cheaper than the four-year college, but honestly, tuition is still heavy on you if you're paying it all by yourself.” This was physically and mentally taxing on him but at the time, it was the only way to stay enrolled in college. Juan met a student on campus who explained that there was a business sponsorship option to make his tuition more affordable, so he began looking through Partnership’s website and he learned more about the business sponsorship option as an alternative to his tuition expenses, which left him wondering why this was never presented to him. Once Juan set up the sponsorship with his employer, he was then able to leave one of his jobs and that decreased his mental and financial stress.

Bianca's situation differs because since she is not a DACA recipient, she does not have access to the business sponsorship option. This means that paying the out-of-state tuition amount is the only way for her to pay for college:

I didn't really think about going to college. The main reason is because I'm undocumented, like I don't have a visa, DACA, or anything. So, when I was in high school, I was like, how am I going to go to college? I can go, I can't get FAFSA. Who's going to pay for my college tuition? I'm going to have to pay out-of-state tuition.

As such, Bianca has had to make several sacrifices, one of them being how many courses she registers for every semester. Given the higher tuition amount, she has only been able to take one course per semester, which has affected her academic progress. Not only did this delay her timeline for graduation, but the social aspect of her college experience:

“It’s also hard when I’m leaving classes with friends, and they ask me what class I’m going to next” (Bianca). Bianca tells them that she is only able to afford taking one class at a time. Classmates tend to look confused by that and she then explains that she is undocumented and how she must pay out-of-state tuition without access to financial aid. So, aside from the financial strain her enrollment takes on Bianca and, on her family, there is also the social aspect of not being able to fully engage in the college experience along with her classmates.

The challenges that Bianca, Frida, Juan, and Juliet experienced while trying to afford their education were very real challenges where they did not receive the information that they needed from their campuses. Although these students communicated with various college employees to get help, they were not successful in getting the guidance that they requested. Their experiences align with what Crisp and Nora (2009) found in their study that demonstrated the financial implications that influence Latinx students’ decisions to attend and academic progress while enrolled at community colleges. In spite of these barriers, students were resourceful in finding ways to pay for their education.

Choosing a Major

Another aspect of students’ experiences that they expressed as challenging, especially without personalized guidance, was the process for them to explore and to choose a college major. Yessica and Luna both attended cooperative and innovative high schools, which in theory, are designed to help students progress toward their eventual careers by completing an associate degree while in high school (NCCCS). Despite having

access to this program, both students mentioned that their academic advising experiences were more prescriptive about choosing classes for an associate degree rather than exploring potential careers:

I was in a program and in that program, they would just tell you, you know, do these classes, get it over with. I was just young. I was being pushed around and told what to do. I didn't really have an end goal. What do you want to work as? What do you want to major in? I don't know. I'm just going to finish the program.
(Yessica)

As a result, Yessica graduated from her early college and then began working in fast food for several years, which was not part of her academic plans. Yessica's mother urged her to go back to school and to find another career for quite some time before Yessica realized that working in the fast-food industry was not where she wanted to spend her life. Her husband had expressed interest in moving to another state, so Yessica took a short-term course that allowed her to begin working in healthcare. After she worked in healthcare, she learned about a program that offered a nationally recognized credential that would serve as job security for wherever she moved. Yessica researched and was accepted into her competitive entry healthcare program without finding a campus resource to guide her along the way.

Luna, while enrolled at the same early college as Yessica, also discovered her career field entirely on her own. Luna was walking across campus when she saw a flyer about a healthcare program that included pictures of medical equipment, which reminded her of her favorite television show:

Okay. So, I'm telling you, I literally found a flyer in the health science program building. I saw it there and I saw the little instruments and tools and I feel like Grey's Anatomy was what kind of inspired me to get into that program. I saw the tools there, so I read about it and about rearranging the operating room.

Luna saw the flyer, decided to research the program, and watched videos about that career online. Once she realized that this program was what she wanted to do, she then reached out to the program coordinator to learn more about the admissions process for the competitive entry program. The program's coordinator then explained the specific courses that Luna needed to take the following semester to help her begin the health science program after she graduated from the early college high school. The academic advising that Luna received from the program coordinator allowed her to meet the admission requirements for her program, and she is now in her second year of the program.

The lack of formal career exploration services was another situation that Juliet experienced during her time at Alliance. As Juliet was trying to enroll at Alliance, she planned to enroll in their nursing program. During the semester where she was unable to enroll, Juliet worked as a nursing assistant to gain experience in healthcare in preparation for when she applied to the nursing program. However, it was during this time as a nursing assistant that Juliet learned that the nursing field was not quite for her:

So, then I was at Alliance one day, just cruising along the buildings and then I saw this building, this classroom that said surgical technology on it. And I was like, what is surgical technology? I just started looking into it and I was like, oh my goodness, this is exactly what I want to do.

After the challenges Juliet faced in paying for her tuition at Alliance, she noticed a sign in a campus building about Surgical Technology and it was that coincidence, along with her own initiative, that resulted in her choosing a career field. Juliet researched the program on her own, was accepted into the program, and is scheduled to graduate this year.

Juliet, Luna, and Yessica's experiences demonstrate how they did not find or receive help from formal career services on their campuses. On the contrary, these students found their own ways of exploring and selecting their careers. Juliet and Yessica had to spend a short time working in healthcare to rule out possibilities but that was valuable time where they were then able to learn more about their career interests. That experience, coupled with independent research conducted after finding flyers and signs on their campus, demonstrated these students' resourcefulness. These three students progressed from ideas about healthcare programs to their upcoming graduations, all while doing so alone. This presents another aspect of the educational pipeline where students exemplified autonomy and ingenuity in selecting their career paths.

College Employees Don't Look Like or Understand Me

Four students in this study from two different community colleges stated that another challenge they faced was that they did not see college employees on their campuses that ethnically looked like them. Luna and Yessica's indication of this is extremely important because both spent several years on their campuses from their times in early college programs and as traditional college students. Luna pointed this out when she stated:

But I feel like that would kind of make me feel more comfortable or I wouldn't be that afraid to apply for college or just didn't know what to do. I wouldn't have been that clueless, but having someone or having more Hispanic, Latino advisers there. I haven't encountered one, I don't know if there's one there at Alliance, but that would have been like something good for other Latino students.

So, for a student to spend roughly five years on a college campus and to not see employees from similar cultural backgrounds was a challenge for them. Frida and Samantha have attended Partnership Community College for several years and they, too, have encountered few college employees that they can culturally connect with. Samantha explained that she was hoping to find that in her Spanish classes but that was not the case. All four students expressed that it would be nice to be able to walk into a Latinx advisor's or Instructor's office for help but that had not happened for them. Yessica continued by saying that throughout all of her years on her campus, she had not seen any campus efforts to celebrate or to promote Hispanic culture. As a matter of fact, my recruitment flyer coincided with Hispanic Heritage Month and Yessica interpreted that as a campus initiative, which made her feel appreciated:

I really appreciated when I saw your flyer, talking about Mexican or Hispanic students. That really stuck with me. Alliance is finally opening up to a different kind of culture of students. When I first started, it was aimed solely toward American, white, English-speaking people. So, it was nice to see them finally grow closer to other cultures and to be accommodating to different languages and backgrounds.

Yessica's interpretation of the two events resonated with me because Alliance and I did not necessarily plan that to be the case. However, it reflects how Yessica has felt as a Latinx student on her campus for several years now. For these students, the ability to

meet with and to seek help from a Latinx college employee would have allowed them to feel represented on their campuses.

Another example of this theme was how the participants mentioned not seeing themselves culturally reflected in the college employees on their campuses. Six students from all three community colleges indicated that they did not feel like employees took the time to understand them or the challenges that they have faced to remain enrolled. Juan, for example, stated:

Not only is there nobody that looks like you, but there's also nobody that knows your struggle. Even if someone doesn't look like me or speak the same language as me, maybe they can at least understand my struggles and what I have to go through to get from point A to point B to point C. I never had that.

Juan acknowledges that aside from the ethnic makeup of his campus, he would have liked for someone to simply acknowledge how much more it has taken for him to become and to remain a college student. This was especially important for Juan who worked over 50 hours a week at two jobs and registered for 6 classes at the out-of-state rate, just to make his educational goals a reality. Hearing this from him reflects the importance of students feeling that they matter to the institution, which was not the case for Juan. When his having to pay out-of-pocket would come up during academic advising sessions with a college employee, he was often asked why he hadn't thought about filling out the FAFSA. While it may have been a well-intended suggestion, it showed how disconnected those employees were from him and from his situation. So, having someone to acknowledge these challenges was extremely important to him, yet that did not happen.

All of these institutional factors listed here are ways that students indicated how their campuses were not as supportive as students needed for them to be. As evidenced by students' continued enrollment, they were able to find other ways of paying for college, choosing a major, and dealing with the reality of their cultural heritage having limited representation on campus. Having established these challenges, we will now learn about how despite presenting several challenges for students, there are several ways that community colleges are supporting Latinx students.

Institutional Support

In this section, I present the ways in which students articulated that they felt supported by their community colleges. Students identified specific campus services, departments, and employees that served as advocates or resources for them. This section demonstrates what campuses are doing well, as indicated by the Latinx students in this study.

Campus Services

While students expressed facing challenges at their institutions, there were several instances where students accessed campus services that were extremely beneficial for them. As a matter of fact, there were two military veterans and one military spouse from Alliance and Partnership colleges who identified the Veterans Affairs (VA) Centers on their campuses as valuable resources. All three students indicated that once their colleges connected them to the campus VA Centers, their enrollment became easy to navigate. Virginia specifically stated:

I signed up and went to the orientation like they said I was supposed to and was told I needed to talk to the VA person. She was the person that really said, okay, this is what you need to do. This is what I need from you. You should be able to hear something within this amount of time. Go to your advisor, sign up for your classes, and when you're done, come back to me. I was only able to get the GI bill done on time because she knew what she was doing. I walked in and she was like, I need this, this, this, and that and we're good to go. I was like, oh, well, okay.

This highlights how the VA Center on campus was able to offer Virginia the exact type of help that she needed. The enrollment process is a critical part of becoming a college student, and Virginia was very fortunate to have access to her campus' VA Center, which made it a seamless transition for her.

Samantha also expressed how helpful the VA Center on her campus was for her, "I received a lot of help from the veterans upward program. They were like, if you need anything, we got you. It was super easy. I would ask them, hey, they need this. And they would tell me where to go to get it." Similar to Virginia, Samantha never had to worry about what to do next or how to do it. For Samantha, her campus VA Center served as a resource for her well after the enrollment process. Anytime that Samantha had an issue come up, she knew just where to go:

If I had a problem with a class, 'cause I was frustrated, she would find me to help. She would ask me, "Do you want a tutor? Do you want this? Do you want that?" Or she would direct me to the person to talk to about the situation.

Samantha's connection to this campus service really speaks to the impact that it's had on her as a college student. Not only did they personalize the enrollment process for her, but Samantha also knew that if anything came up in her classes, she had a designated center on campus to turn to for assistance. Samantha and Virginia provided an example of how

detailed guidance eliminated confusion and directed them to a specific department on campus where they could obtain the help that they needed.

Several students also indicated that being able to access academic resources on their campuses was very helpful for them. Frida, Juan, and Virginia mentioned that they frequented the writing and success centers on their campuses, which served as a great resource for them. As a matter of fact, during one of Juan's visits to his campus' student success center, he met a student who informed him of the business sponsorship opportunity through his employer to avoid paying out-of-state tuition. Not only did Juan access the services that the center directly offered for students but during his visit, he also indirectly learned of another resource that would alleviate a financial burden for him. Virginia mentioned that she went to the writing lab on campus, and it was a big relief for her as she was working on a paper for her technical program. Frida accessed her campus' Math, Science, and Writing centers, especially since her course grades factor into her admittance to a program that only admits a certain number of students per year. Frida stated that she has already invested a lot of time and money into this program, so it is important for her to be able to access these resources along the way.

One of the services that Lily mentioned as extremely important to her academic progress was learning about her campus' mental health services. Lily, who attends Bridge Community College, mentioned that she took time off after high school to work before enrolling at her college. Once she did enroll, she struggled with balancing her life and academic responsibilities but found help on campus:

I know that when I hit rock bottom my first semester, I just went up to my professor and I was like, I think I'm going to have to withdraw because I cannot concentrate in class. But through him I found this service and they pay for most of my therapy sessions and then they also helped me find a good therapy place where they work with you. That was super helpful.

Lily reached a point where she felt that she “hit rock bottom” and was ready to step away from school. Having a frank conversation with her professor resulted in a referral to free mental health services that the college offered for students. Lily’s professor saw an opportunity to help Lily beyond the classroom and connected her to the college’s mental health services. Lily admitted that continuing to access these services has helped her both in and out of the classroom.

In this section, we learned about the campus services that are positively influencing Latinx students’ academic success. However, it is important to note that the services offered by campus VA centers are only accessible to students who served, or whose family member served, in the military. The campus writing and success centers are available to all students and Friday, Juan, and Virginia’s examples demonstrate the ways that their services benefit students. In Lily’s case, it was only through the conversation with her professor that she learned about, and was able to access, her campus’ free mental health services. These students’ responses affirm that these campus services positively impact their academic performances and present an opportunity for enhancing communication about their availability to students.

Employees as Advocates and Guides

Lily’s experience with her professor aligned with that of several other students who identified specific employees as positively influencing their academic success.

Bianca, Crystal, Lily, and Yessica all named individuals throughout the enrollment process that served as valuable resources and as motivators when students faced challenges. As an undocumented student, Bianca cannot register for classes until the semester begins, which significantly limits the courses with seats available for her. However, Bianca found an academic advisor who works behind the scenes with various departments to explain Bianca's situation and arranges for seats to be secretly held for her. This is critical to Bianca's academic progress because having to pay the out-of-state tuition rate limits how many classes she can take and not being able to register for courses that are prerequisites for others will only prolong her timeline for graduation. Bianca elaborated on this by stating:

It was just stressful. Especially when classes are starting, and I don't know if I'm going to be able to have a spot. That's when everything just builds up. But then when I do have a spot, it's just, it's a big relief for me.

We begin to see that aside from the academic progress aspect of Bianca's situation, there is also an emotional toll that the uncertainty during registration takes on her. Bianca has built a strong relationship with an academic advisor who understands her plight, and advocates on her behalf to hold a seat for her in the courses that she needs.

Crystal attends Alliance Community College; she identified an individual in her campus' Financial Aid Department as having been extremely helpful for her:

The person in the financial aid office helped me fill out the FAFSA. That's something that was helpful because for me, it's difficult to go through everything and know that I didn't miss something. That was really helpful to have another person to go through it with me.

Crystal mentioned that this individual sat at a computer with her and helped her begin and complete the FAFSA, which can be a daunting task. Crystal explained that she earned an associate degree from Alliance, and as she was considering returning for another degree, she consulted this individual who found additional scholarships to help cover her tuition expenses. Having the financial aspect of her continued enrollment covered was critical for Crystal, and she indicated that as positively influencing her ability to continue her education. Crystal reflected on her time as a work-study student for a senior administrator at Alliance and through their interactions, was able to identify the need for increasing the availability of campus materials in Spanish. Crystal's recommendation was embraced and thus, Alliance has undertaken additional efforts to incorporate bilingual material into their student communication plans.

Yessica also attends Alliance and she, too, referred to one particular person in the Financial Aid Department as extremely helpful for her. Yessica met with a representative to discuss her options for paying for college and learned about different student loan options. Through this conversation, Yessica learned about a type of student loan that, based on Yessica's major, may end up becoming a forgivable debt that she would not have to repay. Paying for college was a new challenge for Yessica and having someone that she knew that she could turn to for help was extremely important to her.

Lily had a similar experience with a college employee on campus as she was struggling to successfully complete the FAFSA. Lily mentioned that her parents are undocumented and that they were apprehensive about divulging tax information to the government. This also meant that there were additional components of the FAFSA that

had to be printed and mailed off to the Department of Education, which then delayed the timeline for securing a payment method for her tuition. Lily found a representative in the Financial Aid Department that supported her when she was stressed and close to giving up:

And with the financial advisor, when I was so close to just giving up two days before the semester started, he was like, no, we're two days away and in two days we can do a lot. So, he's also someone that I always go to. I don't care who the college says is my advisor, I'm going to go to him because that's my comfort zone.

As we've noted before, paying for college was a stressful component of pursuing one's educational goals and having a representative who could provide reassurance of their willingness to help Lily was of utmost importance. This person left such an impression on Lily that she stated how, regardless of which employee's caseload she fell under, she always went to this particular employee who has proven to be a resource and an advocate for her. Through these examples we can better understand the pivotal role that college employees play in the lives of first-generation Latinx students' enrollment at community colleges.

Program Coordinators

Along with staff members on college campuses, several students referenced the relationships with the faculty members within their academic programs as instrumental in their academic progress. Specifically, faculty members who served as program coordinators have played an integral role in students' lives. As Luna was in her last year at the early college, she realized that she did not want to transfer to a university after all. She saw a flyer on campus promoting a health science major, and she emailed the

program coordinator to learn more about the program. During that meeting, the program coordinator reviewed Luna's transcript and recommended courses for her to take to help her meet the program's competitive entry requirements. Without that advising meeting, Luna would have had to wait another academic year to apply for admission so the timing of the advice that she received expedited her acceptance into the program. Luna explained that her program coordinator has offered her more than just advising and registration advice and regularly talks to her about academic and career options for when Luna graduates. During Luna's first week in the program, the program coordinator scheduled a visit of recent graduates from their major to speak to the first-year students to share about their experiences in the program as well as out in the workforce. Being able to see the connection between what she would be learning in the program and how it would provide career opportunities for her was something that Luna greatly appreciated about her program coordinator.

Crystal shared a similar experience about how her program coordinator was a positive influence in her academic studies:

She was not only concerned about my student life, but also my personal life. I do a lot of writing papers and essays, and I guess she liked my story. She recommended me for a scholarship that I needed so I think that she was more involved than most teachers.

Crystal explained that while she was simply completing an assignment in the course, her story resonated with the program coordinator, who then advocated for her to receive an additional scholarship. Crystal has had to work a full-time job to help with her family's

finances so, as Crystal stated, this program coordinator's recommendation for this scholarship alleviated a financial stressor for her.

Virginia shared another example of how her program coordinator advocated for her continued academic progress and success. As Virginia was finishing up an associate degree, her program coordinator saw something in her abilities and asked Virginia if she would be willing to return to Alliance to complete a second associate degree in a related field. Virginia explained that she had exhausted her husband's GI Bill and would soon lose that tuition assistance benefit so re-enrolling in college would present a financial challenge for her family. The program coordinator then offered Virginia a scholarship to help alleviate this financial burden and created an opportunity for Virginia to work on a second associate degree. As Virginia was registering for her last semester in the second degree program, the additional credit hour requirements for graduation increased her tuition just above what the scholarship covered. Virginia mentioned this to her program coordinator who then found Virginia an additional scholarship that not only covered the remaining tuition balance, but it also paid for her textbooks for the semester. Virginia stated that the program coordinator has helped many of her classmates throughout their time in the program. When students have expressed facing financial hardships, the program coordinator went out of her way to secure gas cards for students to make sure that they could continue traveling to campus so that their academic progress was not interrupted.

One common thread throughout these institutional factors that students identified as supportive as they pursued their educational goals was that through these interactions,

college employees made students feel as if they mattered to them. Aside from the co-curricular and financial support offered, it was the feeling that someone had a vested interest in their lives that resonated with students. Lily explained it as, “I felt comfortable. I felt heard, like listened to and I mean, you’re in college and you’re working and that’s kind of what anybody wants. It’s like for someone to know your schedule and how hard and difficult it can be.” Ultimately, it was the fact that someone acknowledged the challenges that Lily faced that made her feel seen and heard on her campus. These employees went beyond class registration to listen to Lily’s story and to offer their support, which was exactly what she needed from them. Through these students’ stories, we begin to see how various college employees, specifically program coordinators, positively influenced Latinx students’ continued academic progress.

Recommendations for Community Colleges

So far, we have heard various aspects of students’ experiences where their institutions presented challenging situations for them as well as those experiences where their college faculty, staff, and support programs helped them overcome challenges. Rather than trying to take the liberty to piece together ways to bridge the gap between students’ positive and negative experiences, I ended every interview by asking this very question to the students. I decided that the best way to learn what Latinx students needed from their institutions was to simply pose this question directly to them. This next section lists the suggestions that students made for their colleges to enhance the ways that they serve Latinx students.

More Diversity in College Employees

Luna and Yessica mentioned that throughout their many years of attending Alliance, they had not met a Latinx advisor or instructor and students at both other community colleges expressed having similar experiences. Samantha attends Partnership CC and when presented with the opportunity to provide a recommendation to her college, she stated:

I would say there needs to be more diversity in the working area. I don't want to offend anybody, but I would say, we just need more diversity. We need more professors that are Hispanic or any other races. Other workers in Financial Aid and Admissions. I feel like there should be at least one Hispanic that can relate and can actually help students, even if it's speaking Spanish because I've been there where I had to help people that don't know English, so I help. It sounds bad to say, but it shouldn't be my job, it should be them that are getting paid to do that. So, I feel like more diversity in the personnel could make other people, Hispanics maybe feel more comfortable.

Samantha is willing to help other Latinx students whenever possible, but her concern expressed shortly after this response was that, what would happen to Spanish-speaking students when she wasn't around to help them? Samantha raised an important question because if community colleges were designed to be accessible sources of higher education for their respective communities, then how can they continue staffing departments in ways that don't reflect their community? Samantha identified the Admissions and Financial Aid departments, which are critical components of the enrollment process, as two areas that should have employees who can speak Spanish. Increasing the number of Latinx employees on college campuses would also allow first-generation Latinx students to connect with and to receive the cultural nourishment

(Gonzalez, 2002) that they often lack on college campuses. This was also a relevant finding in Perez Velez' (2018) study within a North Carolina community college.

This was echoed by other students to include diversity outside of ethnicity and how helpful it would be to know that college employees were also first-generation college students. When Juan referenced the lack of ethnic representation along with employees not understanding his situation as a challenge, he echoed Samantha's sentiments and stated that he, too, would recommend increased cultural representation to community colleges. Although at another college, Luna shared this experience during her time as a college student.

I feel like they could be a little bit more understanding of how our life is and like the struggles of being a first-generation student and like how our community is and our environment. I feel like, if I had an advisor who was also a first-generation student, she would kind of be more understanding of how scared I was, or I just didn't know what to do. So, for me, it would have been helpful having someone who was a first-generation student.

Luna expressed that having someone understand how intimidating the enrollment process and academic progress can be for first-generation college students would have made her feel understood on her campus. Although Juan, Luna, and Samantha attend different schools, all three students shared a common recommendation on how community colleges can improve services for Latinx students. By increasing the number of Spanish-speaking employees, community colleges would reduce communication gaps that currently exist for students and parents. Luna expanded on this by stating that working with college employees who made students aware that they, too, had been first-generation

college students would increase her comfort level when seeking help from various departments on campus.

Detailed and Personalized Guidance

A common thread that students identified throughout the supportive and challenging aspects of their experiences were the differing levels of personalized guidance they received. For those students who did receive it, they identified specific individuals that simplified what would have been complicated processes that are often troublesome for many students. Lily explained that because of the stress with the financial aid application process, she was at the point of walking away from college. Lily found an employee who understood her frustration and reassured her that they would do everything that they could to make sure that her financial aid application was successfully processed. Lily shared that this was the reason why it did not matter who was assigned as her academic and financial aid advisors, because she would continue to only seek help from those specific employees who had facilitated her enrollment at the college.

We also heard from students who did not receive this type of support from their campuses. Juliet specifically stated that the complications with her financial aid caused her so much stress that she had to delay her enrollment for a semester. Not only was Juliet still having to pay for her tuition out of pocket because she had yet to receive the help that she needed but taking that semester off caused her to have increased course loads as she was applying for admission into a competitive health science program. Juliet added that all these factors combined did not provide her with the option to withdraw from courses whenever she was not doing well in them.

During the member check session, I shared my initial findings with students and Bianca's jaw dropped when she heard how clearly delineated the enrollment process was for students who had access to their campus VA centers. She was astonished to hear that campuses had the ability to offer that type of personalized help to certain students:

I feel like they should do that for students paying out-of-state tuition. You're paying a lot of money out-of-pocket and you're trying to figure everything out by yourself. Classes, advising, registration, any type of aid. Undocumented students just want to get an education.

Bianca presented the fact that she was paying more for her education, while she was also left to navigate the financial aspect of her experience without suggestions for her unique situation. Bianca's experience is in direct opposition to that of students who received personalized guidance from their campuses. So, Bianca would absolutely recommend that institutions expand the Veterans Affairs centers' practices on their campuses to make them available for all students. These students' recommendation aligns with Rendón's (1994) study that detailed the importance of Latinx students feeling validated by college employees on their campuses.

In the quote at the beginning of the chapter, Juan made an observation about the obstacles that first-generation, Latinx college students encounter when going to college. He mentioned that when Latinx students face barriers in paying for and becoming college students, they then add to the low percentage of Latinx students who go on to earn college degrees. Juan depicted an image where the barriers faced when accessing higher education and the lack of personalized guidance then create a cycle where Latinx students lose agency over their academic and career options. This observation identified a leak in

the formal educational pipeline that causes differing experiences and eventual outcomes for students.

That is precisely why several students indicated that given the challenges that they faced in trying to afford college, they recommended that community colleges have all of their financial information and resources easily accessible for students. Bianca and Juan specifically stated that their academic progress and personal stress levels would have been drastically reduced during their first year of college, had they known about the business sponsorship option available through their employers. Juan would not have had to work over 50 hours a week at two jobs and Bianca would have been able to take more than one course per semester. Juliet stated several times that she would not have had to miss her first semester of college to work and save up money to pay for her tuition. Their experiences directly reflect what Núñez et. Al (2011) and Rodríguez et al. (2015) found in their studies that highlighted how having to juggle off-campus employment in order to afford higher education can negatively impact students' academic progress. Several students expressed the concern that they should not have had to learn about ways to afford their education from classmates and friends by happenstance but instead, this should have come from college employees. Knowing that these barriers exist for so many students, the students in this study expressed their recommendation that every employee that interacts with Latinx students throughout the enrollment processes should regularly check-in with students to make sure that they do not become discouraged and in turn, abandon their educational goals.

Communication Beyond Classes and Grades

As an extension of students' yearning for personalized communication from college employees, one recommendation was that they wanted that to happen outside of grade and registration contexts. Crystal said that she would like for more instructors to reach out to her beyond her grades in their classes. She understands that faculty members have a lot of other responsibilities but for her, it would make her feel like she mattered to them as a person and not just as a student. Lily echoed this recommendation by stating:

I just want to be heard. I want to know that my voice counts, too. So far, I've gotten all the help that I can get, but maybe someone else hasn't, maybe another Latino or Latina hasn't and I just want that same help that I've gotten from those three people to be passed on to the person that's next to me. Those same resources, the same kindness, the same listening ear, I feel like that would make any college student feel safe and want to stay in college and want to keep going.

Lily's response acknowledged that she felt seen and heard on her campus. However, Lily wants to ensure that every other Latinx student feels that way and that they, too, have that same type of experience from more than just the three people that have done it for her. This recommendation connects with what Hernández and López (2004) found in their study that emphasized the positive influence that faculty members had on Latinx students when their communication extended beyond the classroom.

Conclusion

Thus far, we have heard directly from Latinx students on ways that North Carolina community colleges have presented challenging situations for them followed by ways that students felt supported on their campuses. Students expressed that learning how to pay for college resulted in differing experiences for them. Students identified how

certain college employees made sure that paying for college was clearly explained for students but that was not the case for all students in this study. Several students also explained that learning about and selecting college majors was another aspect of their experiences that they had to learn to do on their own. Some students shared how they felt as if they were left to fend for themselves as they pursued their educational goals while others shared that they received the help that they needed to academically succeed. These differing experiences present conflicting perspectives where some students are being supported while others expressed that they were not.

Through these students' experiences, which run the gamut from positive to negative, we understand how Latinx students' academic progress is disproportionately inconsistent. The LatCrit framework allows us to analyze these differing experiences within higher education as a point where "the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression" result in oppressive or restrictive outcomes for some students (Solorzano and Bernal, 2001). Through the lens provided by the LatCrit framework, we understand that institutions are simultaneously promoting and precluding Latinx students' progression through the formal educational pipeline. This is critical for community colleges to acknowledge and to address if they truly aspire to be the accessible and affordable academic option for their respective communities. Otherwise, they will continue to provide conflicting opportunities and challenges for Latinx students who simply aspire to achieve their educational goals.

CHAPTER V

PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY FACTORS THAT CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT LATINX STUDENTS

In the previous chapter, I used the LatCrit framework to identify the institutional factors that Latinx students identified as challenging, supportive, and students' recommendations for modifying existing practices to benefit future students. In this chapter, I use the Community Cultural Wealth framework to examine the personal and community factors that challenge and support students as they navigate their experiences at North Carolina community colleges. Much like the last chapter, I begin by listing the challenges that students encounter in their homes and in their communities to help us understand the off-campus elements that students must overcome. I then share how students were resourceful in overcoming these challenges and how they simultaneously found support from their families and their communities. I end this chapter by sharing how the Community Cultural Wealth framework allows us to recognize students' connections to their homes and communities as sources of strength and support.

Off-Campus Challenges

In the previous chapter, students identified the institutional factors that influenced their experiences on their campuses and in their interactions with college employees. In this section, I present the home, personal, and community challenges that the participants encountered during their time as college students. These particular challenges were faced

in various spaces that students navigate in their personal lives, which means that they were dealt with off-campus. Some of these challenges directly impacted students' academic progress while others did so indirectly, all of which were addressed and overcome by the students.

Family's Understanding of a Job Versus a Career

Throughout the virtual interviews, I asked students to think about the off-campus challenges that they dealt with since they have been in college. Four students indicated that because of their status as first-generation college students, having their families understand how a college education would improve their career options later in life was a challenge. Bianca and Lily attributed this challenge within their respective households to the Latinx cultural tendency for young ladies to focus on marriage and childbearing customs. Lily noted:

You cannot imagine as a female Latina, how many times I've been asked, 'are you going to get married? Are you going to have kids?' And it's like, hold up, I'm only 22. Slow your role. I'm in college, I'm in school and this is what I want to do.

Although feeling significant pressure at home to start a family, Lily remains steadfast in her commitment to her education. Lily explained that these external expectations were frustrating for her because of how passionate she is about refuting those norms; more of her story is included throughout this chapter and in the next chapter. Bianca also faced this same challenge as Lily and explained it as:

And like Lily said sometimes when parents are like, 'when are you going to get married and have kids?' It's like, dude, what if I don't want to get married or have kids? I just want to go to school, help the community but they're like, no, 'do you

just want to be lonely for the rest of your life?' I'm like, no, I'm going to be happy doing what I do. You know? That's what I want.

Both Lily and Bianca indicated that their education was of the utmost importance to them and despite having these pressures put upon them, they were not deterred from reaching their goals. Bianca went as far as to say that she is solely focused on her academic and professional career and is not concerned about whether she marries. Through their continued enrollment in college, Bianca and Lily directly challenge and contradict the external pressure that is placed on them.

Carla experienced a similar challenge with having her family understand why she was pursuing a college degree, except for a different reason. Carla stated that there were financial factors to why some students may also struggle with having family members understand the importance of their education and their eventual careers:

My family sometimes doesn't give education that importance, so I think we need to fight against that because other things are considered more important than education like working. We are used to that because I mean, we need to make a living. We need to pay the rent. In this country, you need to have a car and things like that so I think when you come here, it's very easy to go the way of making money but you have to think when you're a little bit older you cannot do such a hard job. So, I think they give more importance to work in a lot of families.

Carla and her mother immigrated to the United States from Costa Rica while her father and brother had to remain in their home country. As immigrants, Carla and her mother encountered financial obligations that often require households to focus on the family's collective financial well-being. In this case, Carla mentioned how that is often the

pressure and the reality that a lot of students experience as they try to shift from working a job now to preparing for a career in the future.

Yessica indicated that she, too, has seen many Latinx friends deal with this challenge. Yessica had to take out student loans to finish her degree, and she often heard people struggling to understand her decision to bypass short-term employment, while taking out a student loan, for her eventual career. She said that for many people who she heard that from, they tend to share the belief that households need the additional income now. However, Yessica has remained committed to her career because “I’m sacrificing time and money now but in a couple of years, I’m getting it back and doubled or tripled.” Yessica is fluent in English and Spanish and is graduating from a health science program that will grant her a nationally recognized certification; she understands that her education is an investment toward future career opportunities.

Thus far, students have identified challenging conversations that they had with family members in an effort to educate their loved ones on why they are focused on their educational goals. Through these students’ responses, we understand the cultural and financial stressors that students must overcome when pursuing a career instead of working a job for the rest of their lives. This is a challenge that some students run into in their homes, yet they remain focused on the benefits that their academic studies will have on their professional careers in the future.

Mental Health Stigma in Latinx Communities

Another external challenge that several students in this study mentioned was having Latinx relatives understand the reality and the importance of their mental health.

As first-generation college students, the participants often found themselves in relatively unknown academic scenarios to work through, which caused internal struggles for them.

When asked about a specific challenge that they faced while in college, Bianca stated:

I think about mental health because sometimes my parents don't believe in mental health. They think that depression is that you're just upset and that you need to clean, but I think that mental health is really important. Even if you're in high school or middle school, it doesn't matter, parents need to learn more about that because I know my parents were close minded in that topic. I feel like there should be more support for that, especially if you're in college, too. You're the first generation and you're stressed, overwhelmed, or you're just depressed.

Bianca's response captured the difficulty of not having her stress and depression acknowledged within her home and that her family's approach to dealing with her mental health issues was advising her to stay busy with household chores. Bianca continued by explaining that the emotional aspects of being a first-generation college student was an important factor in her experiences that is often overlooked.

Juan explained that juggling all of his responsibilities on and off campus took a toll on his mental health. He reflected on his first year in college and explained:

Another challenge would have been creating a balance. A lot of people, what they forget about when they go to college is you have to create a balance to be able to keep yourself stable mentally. I learned that the hard way after my second semester when I was working over 40 hours a week while taking a full-time load. You have to find stability and balance and you have to make sure you're good mentally before you go out and achieve your goals.

Juan indicated that balancing all of his obligations was something he learned "the hard way", especially when it came to his mental health. Juan specifically stated that he

worked full-time, took a full-time course load, and realized that he had to find ways to ensure his mental stability.

Bianca identified her mental health and having it understood by family members as a challenge that she encountered as a college student. The lack of understanding from her family, coupled with the advice to address it through chores, presented difficult moments for Bianca. Both Bianca and Juan worked multiple jobs to afford the out-of-state tuition rate, which was another variable that impacted the status of their mental health. Bianca and Juan's methods for addressing this particular issue are explained in the next chapter of this dissertation.

Not Enough Latinx Role Models

As students were exploring different career fields, several students mentioned that they then faced another challenge. Similar to when students expressed that they did not feel that their college employees reflected their ethnicity, students also indicated that they could not find enough Latinx role models in many of their career fields. Juliet and Luna both attend Alliance CC, are in the same health science program, and their program requires that they do clinical rotations. Both students indicated during the member check session that they had not encountered any Latinx employees as they visited different operating rooms. Luna specifically stated that they were "the only two Hispanics in the O.R. and in our program at the college." Luna's observation conveys how she and Juliet did not see themselves reflected on their campus or in their eventual career field. Juliet mentioned that this was concerning for her because she essentially did not have someone to look up to that she could culturally identify with. Despite this being their reality, Juliet

mentioned that they “instantly clicked on the first day because we looked like each other. That’s my girl right there!” Juliet and Luna’s connection to each other reflects their acknowledgement of not having people of their ethnicity represented in their career field and emphasizes their determination to face that challenge together.

Although Juliet and Luna serve as support for each other, the limited ethnic representation on college campuses and in career fields does cause additional stress for students. Bianca explained that this affected her so much that she ended up having to take a break from college:

I feel like at the beginning I started off good but once I got to the third year, like in 2019, I took a break because I just thought that it was too much. Not like too much for me, but I had decided, there's a lot on my shoulders of being the first-generation, being a role model to my siblings, always being there for them, and not having anyone to look up to, like for me. At least my siblings have me to look up to, but I don't have anyone to look up to and ask for advice.

Bianca’s response depicts the emotional and psychological toll that not having someone to turn to as a role model or as a resource may take on first-generation Latinx students. This affected her so much that she ended up taking a break from school, which temporarily halted her academic progress.

The ability to serve as a positive role model for others is something that several students explained that while it was important to them, it also placed additional stress on them. Luna stated that since she was the first person in all of her immediate and extended family to go to college, she was often seen and referred to as the example for others to follow. One of her aunts tells her younger cousins in middle school that she wants them to be like Luna, which internally, causes her to worry about the expectations placed on

her cousins and on herself. This, too, then places additional pressure on Luna's cousins because they feel like they have specific expectations set for them that they must follow. Luna shared some of their conversations by stating:

I hope I can be a good role model for my cousins. Their mom will tell them, just be like Luna. I used to hate when people compared me to someone else, so I don't want them to feel like they have to be like me, but at least keep studying and go to college. I always tell them that it's hard, it's stressful, but I know you guys can do it. Then they're like, yeah, we're a little scared, we don't know if we're going to be like you and I'm like no, don't say that. You are going to do great in whatever decision you make.

This helps us understand Luna's desire for being a positive influence on her cousins and how her aunt, while doing so with good intentions, appears to elevate Luna to a position that she wants her daughters to work toward. Luna admitted that this places additional pressure on her that at times causes her to question whether she is old enough or has accomplished enough to be considered a role model. Luna's cousins admit that this causes fear and stress in whether they feel that they can live up to those expectations. Luna reassures them that they do not have to follow her specific example and that she encourages and supports them making their own decisions.

When Luna's response was shared during a member check session, Juliet acknowledged that she, too, felt the pressure of having to be a role model for others. "The pressure of being a role model is real" she said, "sometimes I overdo it trying to prove myself. It's a lot of pressure." Through Juliet's response we learn about the additional pressure students may feel and how it affects them. Juliet not only identified this

pressure, but she also revealed that it causes her to push herself that much harder and at times, to “overdo it”.

Bianca, Luna, and Juliet indicated that not having Latinx role models in their careers or in their respective communities, positioned them into those roles for others. All three students expressed that this placed additional pressure on them, outside of the already present academic and financial pressures of pursuing their educational goals. For Bianca, this took such a toll on her that she took a break from school and her academic progress was interrupted for a short period of time. For Luna, serving in this role for her younger cousins caused her to second guess her fit for such a role. For Juliet, this causes her to push herself that much harder and acknowledges that at times, it leads her to “overdo it.” These three students established that this was a challenge for them and presented the reality that came with their first-generation college experiences.

So far, we have identified three off-campus challenges that first-generation Latinx college students had to overcome during their time as college students. The first challenge some students expressed was that their pursuit of a college degree often caused them to bypass full-time employment salaries, which created financial stress for working class families. Students mentioned that their education was an investment toward securing a career and having some of their family members understand this was difficult for them. The second challenge that students identified was that there is a stigma surrounding mental health in the Latinx community and their academic progress contributed to their need for having that validated by loved ones. The third challenge that students mentioned was that there were not enough Latinx professional role models in

their communities or in their careers and thus, they were often then thrust into serving in that capacity for others. Although these challenges presented obstacles for students outside of the classroom, this next section focuses on how students overcame them.

Support

Having established in the previous chapter how some students found resources on their campuses to help them overcome certain challenges, this section highlights the off-campus resources that students found in their homes and in their communities. I explain how the students in this study expressed that their families, friends, and community organizations supported them. Through students' stories, I demonstrate how vital Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), specifically aspirational, familial, and social capital, are for many first-generation Latinx college students in this study as they work toward their educational goals.

Family's Direct and Indirect Support

As I met with students throughout this study, one common denominator that came up in almost every interview was how students' families influenced their college experiences. Although students were the first in their families to go to college, their family members played a critical role in supporting them with their studies. While students shared how family members may have been limited in their ability to help with certain aspects of the college enrollment process, they continued to be integral to students' academic progress. There was one student in this study, Luna, who did mention that her family played an active role within her college course work. As Luna was graduating from her early college high school and as she was re-enrolling at Alliance as a

traditional college student, her parents celebrated Luna having earned a high school diploma and an associate degree at the same time by throwing her a graduation party:

They were very supportive from the very beginning, which I'm glad. Both of them are very understanding. They couldn't help me a lot with college stuff like applying, that was just all on me. But you know, their words saying, 'Hey, you can do this. You're gonna make it.' For my graduation, they threw me a big graduation party. So, they were very proud. They were sending pictures to my family in Mexico, and they were like, Oh gosh, Luna graduated?

Luna explained that her parents invited all of their friends and family members over to join them in celebrating her academic accomplishments. Luna's parents even made sure that they took photos and sent them to relatives back in Mexico so that they, too, could recognize Luna's achievement. Having this type of response from Luna's family and friends showed her that she had their full support as she reached one milestone and began working toward another.

Luna's family did not simply celebrate her academic success and as a matter of fact, they are also much more directly involved in her studies. Luna is enrolled in a health science program where students must periodically demonstrate certain skill sets in front of their classmates and instructors. In order to prepare for those demonstrations, Luna incorporates her parents and her sister as she practices her skills before having to present them to the class:

I always show him pictures and videos of everything I do in class. He's always testing me too and he'll be like, 'oh, so what's this instrument called?' Now we do checkoffs, which is like demonstrating a skill, so I told my mom and my dad to sit down and my little sister too. I was like, the three of you, I want you to sit down, and I will show you how to do this skill. As I was showing them, my mom was just taking pictures, and she'd be like, 'Oh, my God. Wow. You look like a

surgeon.' My dad also helps me tie my gown or when I have to pass in something, he'll be like, 'okay, hold it this way' so they're always helping me and I'm helping them in whatever way I can.

Luna's parents help her practice anything from tying her gown on as well as learning how to properly hold medical tools and equipment. Then, as Luna simulates her classroom presentation with her family, they provide helpful feedback. Although Luna's parents had not attended college themselves, they are actively engaged in and are ensuring her academic success. Their involvement may not be formally recognized in academia, yet it depicts how essential they truly are to Luna reaching her educational goals. Luna's parents demonstrate aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) by finding ways to celebrate, encourage, and to engage in Luna's academic accomplishments, in spite of them not having attended college themselves.

While other students' family members did not play as much of a direct role as Luna's parents did with practicing her program skills, family members' indirect involvement was just as important. Carla, Crystal, Juliet, and Samantha mentioned that they had to keep up with their classwork, job schedules, chores at home, caring for pets, and helping at home with younger siblings. The students stated that having to juggle all of this was challenging for them and that their family members stepped in to help offset some of their responsibilities at home. All four of these students shared that their families saw how much they were having to do and decided that they would help alleviate the chores at home so that they could spend more time studying. Crystal explained how her mother and sisters served as indirect support for her studies:

I have two little sisters and I was always going to work and trying to help my parents by cleaning and taking care of them. Right now, I work, and they always try to help me out with cleaning and stuff like that so whenever I get home, I don't have to do any of that. They're basically my support system at home. My mom is a great mom, and she always says, 'it's okay, don't do this, go do your homework' because they know that after work, I go and do my homework. Everyone has been great and really pushing me to keep going to school and accomplishing more.

Crystal identified her family as her support system and recognized how they have taken on some of her responsibilities at home, which then allowed her to focus on her college degree. Having this type of support from her family alleviated some of the stress that comes with maintaining familial obligations while being a college student for Crystal.

Juliet also identified her family, specifically her mother, as indirectly supporting her studies. Juliet expanded on this by stating:

Now that my mom sees me always stuck in my schoolwork doing this and doing that, she's always like, 'Oh, Juliet, good job. You're doing good. You don't have to do this. I'm not going to pressure you to clean up the house because I know you're pretty busy with what you're doing'. At this point she just wants me to finish it and she's supporting me all the way through. That support that I wanted in high school, I'm getting now.

Juliet explained that her family takes care of providing food for her and her mother does some of her chores at home so that she can dedicate that time to her studies. Earlier in our interview, Juliet mentioned that her parents were not familiar with the U.S. grading scale, so they were unable to understand her good grades in high school, which at times caused her to feel unsupported. However, as indicated in this quote, Juliet clarified that she now feels fully supported by her parents as she works toward finishing her college degree.

Carla and her mother have several pets at home that Carla is responsible for, and her mother now makes sure to care for them before Carla gets home. This eliminates at least one chore at home so that she can spend that time doing her homework. Samantha has a baby and is extremely thankful that her mother was able to move in to help with childcare while she is in college:

She supports me a lot 'cause I have a baby, a daughter and she stays with her so that's why she lives with me. That's a nanny 24/7 right there. So, she does help. Like right now, just doing something like this, it's like, 'mom, stay with the baby, I gotta do something' and she's like, 'no problem'. That's a lot of support right there.

Samantha stated that she was fortunate to have her mother living with her because she essentially has a nanny that she can trust, which then allows her to truly focus on her schoolwork. Shortly after this quote in our interview, Samantha even went as far as stating that if it was not for her mother's availability and willingness to help, then she would not be able to handle everything at school, work, and home that require her attention.

Through these students' stories, we learned how family members directly and indirectly support their academic studies. Luna's parents are actively involved and engaged in her preparation for skills demonstrations in her academic program. Carla, Crystal, Juliet, and Samantha shared how their families have provided environments at home that allow them to focus on their homework. All of these students' examples demonstrate how familial capital (Yosso, 2005) provides direct and indirect support structures for students while they pursue their educational goals.

Motivation From and For Family

Yet another way that students explained how their family members factored into their academic progress was that their motivation for pursuing a college education came from their families. Some students saw how hard their parents worked at their jobs to provide for them and for their families. Yessica stated that her mother has had a job since she was a teenager back in Mexico, and she currently works in fast food, which can be physically demanding on her body. Yessica also went on to mention that her mother worked long hours at her jobs to make sure that Yessica and her siblings were taken care of:

So, even though she was always tired and couldn't spend a lot of time with me, she took care of me material wise. She would tell me, 'I do this because these are the things that I never had, and these are the things I wanted to give you.' I thank her because indirectly, even though she wasn't telling me or encouraging me, she kept me on my feet so that I could stand up.

Looking back at her memories from growing up and being in school, Yessica realized that her mother's jobs took a physical toll on her body, yet she pushed through it all to provide for her children. The sacrifices her mother made served as a way to ensure that Yessica could focus on her education. Yessica is now pursuing a college degree after working in fast food alongside her mother and after hearing her mother constantly remind Yessica that she wanted more for her. Yessica decided that she would enroll in a program that would guarantee her a full-time salary with benefits so that she could then have her mother stop working and move in with her. Yessica understands and appreciates what her

mother had to go through, which serves as a constant reminder for her as she faces her own struggles in college.

When asked about her reason for going to college, Virginia mentioned that her daughter was in high school, was recently diagnosed with ADHD, and began to struggle with her schoolwork. Her daughter became discouraged and felt as if these struggles would prevent her from being successful in high school and in college. Virginia explained:

My daughter is in school, and she was diagnosed with ADHD. She was forgetting a lot of her assignments and just being distracted. She's like, 'I'm not going to be able to do this.' And I was like, yeah, you can. Watch, I'll show you. If I can go through this, if I can get a degree with all this circus that I have here, you can do it on your own. So that was the only reason why I went back.

Virginia specifically stated that helping her daughter regain her academic confidence was the only reason that she enrolled in college. Virginia drew her motivation from and for her daughter's academic future.

During my interview with Luna, she explained a similar sentiment as Yessica in wanting to repay her parents for their sacrifices. However, Luna shared that her parents' involvement in her college experience didn't end with her studies. After helping Luna practice the skills portion of her program and seeing her academic success, Luna's father decided to enroll in college himself. Seeing Luna's excitement and growth as she went through college encouraged her father to want to experience that as well:

I'm always asking him how he's doing in class or what he's doing. During the weekends he likes to get in the living room and study, so I always ask him, 'what's this about?' I try to test him out a little bit and he'll be like 'okay, so this is

how you do this and how you do that' because I always show him pictures and videos of everything I do in class. He's always testing me too. And he'll be like, oh, so what's this instrument called?

Luna explained that having this shared experience brought her and her father, along with the rest of her family, much closer. Luna's father admitted that before enrolling in college, he didn't quite understand why she spent so much time reading books and doing homework. Whereas now, he fully understands college homework and their living room is converted into study rooms on weekends. Luna mentioned that they check-in on each other before tests to offer words of encouragement and then celebrate each other once grades are known. Luna's determination for reaching her educational goals has served as encouragement for her father to begin his own educational journey and thus, strengthening their relationship. These stories show how important family was in motivating participants to work through the challenges of being a college student

Fulfilling Our Parents' Dreams

Part of the motivation that students drew from their families was the ability to live out their parents' own dreams along with those that their parents had for them. Rey mentioned that her mother dreamed of becoming a nurse but was never able to become one due to her family responsibilities. She put that dream on hold to provide for Rey and for her siblings but managed to eventually become a nursing assistant. Her dream was for Rey to become a nurse and to live vicariously through her. Rey reflected on this and shared:

She wanted more for me, and her dream was for me to be a registered nurse and so, it's kinda neat that it's coming back around. I mean, I might be old, but it's

okay. I know her sacrifices, and I feel like I've done everything that she wanted me to do.

Rey is now taking the prerequisite courses as she prepares to apply for admission into a nursing program to live out her and her mother's dreams.

Virginia shared that her mother grew up working in the vegetable and cotton fields with Virginia's grandparents, so she appreciated their hard work. Her mother always wanted to go to college but never had the opportunity to do so because she had to care for Virginia and for her brother. Once Virginia's mother found out that she was enrolled in college, she celebrated all of Virginia's grades and constantly reminded her that she was proud of her. Virginia felt such gratitude for her mother's sacrifices and support that once she finished her first associate degree, Virginia mailed her mother an honor cord from her cap and gown. Virginia acknowledged that being able to live out her mother's dream was important to her and that she wanted her mother to have something to commemorate their joint accomplishment. After celebrating Virginia's academic progress in college, her mother was motivated to go to college and "is also back in college and only needs one class to finish her degree." Through Virginia's example we learn how familial capital (Yosso, 2005) was as a source of support for Virginia, who then served in that same capacity for her mother.

Juliet shared that her parents have served and continue to serve as one of the strongest factors in her motivation. Aside from their own work and encouragement, they have sacrificed a lot to support her:

That's another reason for the motivation. I just want my parents, it's not that I want their approval, but I want them to know that they didn't come to this country, and they didn't walk across that border for no reason. They walked across that border so I could get this degree, and I am so thankful they were able to do that because if not, I would be sitting there in Mexico, not pursuing what I have, and [not] having the educational system I have here.

Juliet's parents immigrated to the United States from Mexico and Juliet acknowledged their sacrifice in hopes of providing more opportunities for their children. We learned in the last chapter that despite being a U.S. citizen, Juliet has struggled with filling out the FAFSA and receiving financial aid. Despite her struggles, Juliet remains steadfast in her determination to honor her parents' sacrifices through her education.

So, throughout all of these examples, we learned that many first-generation Latinx college students draw on personal resources within their homes, specifically, motivation and support from their parents. Parents and family members are actively engaged in students' academic studies in some way, shape or form. For some students, such as Luna, family members are directly involved in their education and are learning alongside them. For other students, their families have provided spaces and opportunities at home for them to focus on their studies. Several students in this study identified their families as integral to their ability to achieve their educational goals. These students' stories provide a window for us to understand how vital aspirational and familial capital (Yosso, 2005) are for students to academically succeed in college.

Formal and Informal Community Networks

Several students in this study mentioned that another source of motivation and of support came from formal and informal community networks. These networks included

friends, community members, and community organizations, all of which positively influenced students' college experiences. One source of encouragement that students identified was the role that their friends have played in their becoming and remaining college students. Crystal reflected on her time as she was graduating from high school and how her close friends played a pivotal role in her going to college by stating, "I remember that whenever we were in the process of getting into college, we would talk about things like what profession would end up being fun and creative and things like that." Crystal explained that they talked about college, its affordability, and decided that attending their local community college was their best option. Once they made that decision together, these friends served as encouragement and resources for each other, even going as far as sharing and exploring career information with one another. Crystal and her friends would jokingly discuss trying to see themselves in different careers and that helped them realize that they could be creative when considering college majors.

Rey looked back at her time graduating from high school and while her mother emphasized the importance of going to college with her, it was her friend group that navigated the college enrollment processes together. Luna also identified one of her best friends as a source of continued support:

She has been very supportive of me. She'll be like I've seen you going through a lot. I've seen you cry. I've seen you go through all that stress with this program and she's always been like, I'm proud of you. You inspire me to do better.

This particular friend was enrolled in the early college program with Luna and had to abandon her studies as she neared graduation. This friend understood the importance of

education and what it entailed for Luna, so she has been a constant source of support for Luna. Through their continued friendship, Luna was able to encourage this friend to return to college, and she is now about to finish her associate degree.

Juan explained that he had to essentially create his own support group and was fortunate to find that in his best friend who was also a DACA recipient and who struggled with the financial aspects of graduating from college. When asked about off-campus resources that have helped his academic progress, Juan replied:

Informal networks play a big role in the Latino community. For example, Latino small businesses don't have large, formal marketing plans. A lot of it is word of mouth about someone who speaks your language, who's faced similar struggles, and who you can essentially trust. We're one community.

By examining this view of finding trusting connections with others, we can begin to understand that many Latinx students essentially take the same approach in finding someone with a shared language, experience, and values to connect with or to offer support in education. Crystal and Rey's experiences demonstrated how their friends encouraged them to make college a reality, especially as they were leaving high school. Luna and Juan described their friends as sources of encouragement for them as they struggled with the stressors of being college students. These students' experiences demonstrate how friends make up an informal network of support and provide social capital (Yosso, 2005) for Latinx students. It was through those shared experiences that students sought and found support from their informal networks to become and to remain college students.

Community Organizations

Several students also mentioned that they were connected to formal community organizations that served as sources of encouragement for their academic studies. Crystal was involved in her church and through that involvement, got connected to a local non-profit organization that was offering English classes to Spanish speaking adults in her community and began to help as a volunteer. Her experiences in supporting others influenced her decision to major in Human Services in college, which is a program that leads students to careers where they essentially help others. Luna volunteered while in high school with a community organization that coordinated community service and fundraising events for elementary aged children:

I used to volunteer with an ESL Teacher that worked with all Hispanic and Latino kids. They were like first graders or in kindergarten, and I used to help the teachers doing community service and things like yard sales with the Hispanic and Latino community. I really liked doing this.

Although Luna enjoyed this, she had to stop volunteering once she began the college coursework aspect of her early college program. She ran into the program coordinator at a community event, and he congratulated her on being a college student while in high school. This coordinator attended Luna's graduation and made it a point to find her and tell her how proud he was of what she had accomplished. Luna took pride in giving back to her community, especially since her involvement directly helped Latinx students.

Bianca has been involved in three community service organizations whose involvement influenced how she views her community. The first was through a community service project that she had to complete to graduate from high school where

she learned of a local elementary school counselor who had a mentoring program for young Latinx students. Bianca mentioned that through this program, students took field trips to meet with state and federal officials to learn about how their decisions impact their communities. Bianca shared that she chaperoned a field trip to Washington D.C. where students met with a Latinx official who explained how important it was to vote. Bianca also became involved in a program where she served as an interpreter and coordinated food deliveries for families. This program operated similarly to a food pantry where Bianca made phone calls to Latinx families reminding them of food availability and delivery options to address food insecurity. These experiences are important to Bianca on many levels, including an academic one. Bianca is enrolled in a Community Spanish Interpreter program at Bridge CC so these experiences directly align with what she's learning in her courses:

I'm more involved with helping the community and basically for my voice to be heard as a Latinx. That has helped me know more people and the mentoring program has really given me confidence that I didn't have before of speaking to people now that, how do I say this...*unas personas que nunca pensaría que les iba a hablar* [people that I never would've thought that I'd talk to] because I'm a really shy person. But that has given me the confidence of being like, okay, I need to do this and I gotta talk to these people. If I don't do it, how am I going to get advice for what I'm doing?

Bianca's involvement in these community organizations directly connects with her college major since the community aspect of her curriculum facilitates her passion for helping others. Not only is there a passion and a commitment for helping others but Bianca stated how being involved in those community efforts has given her personal and academic confidence.

Frida explained having a similar experience after a friend encouraged her to volunteer with an environmental group in their community. During her time as a student at Partnership CC, Frida was enrolled in classes while state legislation removed academic opportunities for undocumented students and since she lacked lawful status, Frida was abruptly withdrawn from her classes and spent the next few years working a full-time job. Frida was able to become a DACA recipient and eventually gained full legal status. Yet, as she was trying to reenroll at Partnership CC, she ran into issues with certain college employees who did not want to admit her back into the college. While forced to abandon her studies, Frida's job required her to attend a work meeting in Raleigh and she learned about the North Carolina Community College System Office that oversees all community colleges in the state. So, Frida scheduled a meeting with a representative there who confirmed that she could, in fact, enroll at any community college in the state. Frida returned to Partnership with this information but was still denied admission, so she once again returned to Raleigh. When I asked Frida what kept her going through this frustrating process, she replied:

Well, for the environmental group at first, I was like, no, I don't want to volunteer because it doesn't matter what I think. I don't think things change. Then because of the environmental group, I met somebody that was like, yes, your voice is important. You have to know that if you want to change something, you have to work at it. You can't just be complaining that things are bad and then don't do anything about it. So, that's why she kind of empowered me to, whenever you asked me what made me go back to Raleigh and asked them if I could go to school there, I mean, I think she kind of empowered me. She's like, 'no, you have to go over there and ask them. You can't just be like, oh, I can't do this and just accept it. No, it doesn't work that way.' So, I think, because I volunteered in the environmental group, it helped me. I'm not the only one that had problems with immigration. I know classmates that had the same problem and I told them, if you stay quiet, things are not going to change.

Frida's story demonstrates how the determination and the conviction for what you believe in was taught to Frida and how she integrated those lessons into her commitment to finish her education. Not only has Frida used this lesson learned from a community organization as she's faced issues at Partnership CC, but she then tries to teach others the importance of using their voices and of advocating for change. Simply taking no for an answer was not an option for Frida and she tries to teach that to others whenever possible.

So far, students have identified family and community members as sources of direct and indirect support for them as college students. In Luna's case, her family is actively engaged in her studies as they celebrate and participate in her academic achievements. For other students, their families served as sources of motivation and encouragement for them, especially when faced with challenging situations. Students also explained how formal and informal community networks assist them with overcoming obstacles that they encounter on their campuses. Their experiences indicate that off-campus resources are integral to their continued enrollment and academic success in college.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we learned from students about the off-campus factors that challenge and support their academic progress. Some students faced challenging situations within their homes in having family members understand how bypassing a current income at a job while they were in college was an investment as they prepared for their eventual careers. Other students mentioned that having their mental health statuses acknowledged has been culturally challenging for them in their households. Students also

faced challenges as they explored and worked toward their career fields in that they did not see enough Latinx role models within those fields, at least not within their respective communities. While these scenarios presented challenges for students, this chapter demonstrates that there were far more examples of the various types of capital (Yosso, 2005) that students found in their homes and communities.

Students specifically identified how their family members and formal and informal community networks served as sources of motivation and of support for them. Family members provided direct and indirect motivation for students pursuing higher education as ways of honoring their many sacrifices. This aligns with what Gastic & Verdugo's (2013) study found and demonstrated the role that *familismo* plays in Latinx students' lives and how their academic studies positively influence their homes. Students indicated that their parents immigrated to the U.S. or worked hard labor jobs, which motivated them as they faced many challenges as first-generation college students. Students also identified their younger siblings and their own children as sources of motivation that have helped them academically persist. These stories allow us to understand the impact that aspirational and familial capital (Yosso, 2005) have on students as they pursue college degrees.

Students expressed how their involvement with formal and informal community networks taught them important skills that students incorporated into their studies. Some students identified their friends as part of an informal network that helped them explore college and various career fields. For some students, their friends were sources of encouragement and for others, they were sources of solidarity as they navigated these

new experiences alongside each other. Juan explained how informal networks factor into many aspects of Latinx cultures and how it made sense for that to be a component of their experiences in college. Bianca and Frida demonstrated how their experiences with formal community organizations taught them how to advocate for themselves and for others. Their involvement in these networks and organizations equipped them with social capital (Yosso, 2005) that they incorporated into their academic studies and in their interactions with other Latinx students on their campuses. This notion of reciprocity in these students' stories about accessing and sharing social capital with other Latinx students is expanded on in the next chapter.

Through students' experiences thus far we learned how influential aspirational, familial, and social capital (Yosso, 2005) are in students' lives and in the support systems that they find off-campus. Students incorporated their families and their own aspirational capital as they faced and overcame obstacles they encountered off-campus. Students drew upon this capital to remain focused on their, and their families' dreams for a prosperous future. Several students' families provided both direct and indirect support through their involvement, encouragement, and spaces at home for students to focus on their studies. Many students were resourceful in their use of social capital to navigate college enrollment and career exploration difficulties they experienced as first-generation college students.

These stories provide a different perspective on where knowledge exists and how the most influential support structures that many Latinx students in this study identified were found outside of the institution. Hearing how these students found encouragement,

motivation, and empowerment from outside of the traditional campus support services depicts Latinx students as having access to and possessing social capital that positively impacts their pursuit of a college education. In the next chapter, we learn from students how they took the resources listed in this chapter, internalized them as capital, and utilized them for their, and their community's benefit.

CHAPTER VI

REACHING MY GOALS THROUGH RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

In the previous chapters, I took a traditional approach in how I explained the institutional, personal, and community factors that challenge and support first-generation Latinx community college students. Students explained the on and off-campus resources that they accessed while navigating their college experiences. Participants shared how influential family and community members were for them, and I explained that these aspects of their experiences may not be recognized by educators and administrators as the forms of capital that they are for students. In this chapter, I refute that perspective by uplifting two additional components of community cultural wealth that focus on the students themselves. Thus far, I have listed the people that students have turned to for encouragement and for support, which have been instrumental in their enrollment and their persistence in college. While the students in this study identified those resources as important to them, I use this chapter to highlight how the students have embodied and internalized what they learned from those individuals and organizations to become their own resources. Having people to turn to has been important to these students but there were numerous times where the students had to look within themselves to overcome obstacles. That is why in this chapter, I deviate from the people and programs that students expressed as helpful to them and instead, I focus on the how and why students served as their own sources of encouragement and of support.

As students progressed toward their educational goals, they identified the personal reasons for going into their careers and demonstrated their resourcefulness in this pursuit. While there have been individuals both on and off-campus that students incorporated into their formal and informal networks of resources, the students often looked within themselves to find intrinsic motivation for overcoming the aforementioned challenges. This personal determination is emphasized from a *Ganas/Perseverance Wealth* perspective that (Kanagala et al., 2016) expressed as a source of capital for Latinx students. Understanding this capital allows us to reframe students' stories from a strengths-based perspective that I will now expand on.

Resistance

Throughout the coding processes and member check sessions, I noticed that students incorporated resistance capital (Yosso, 2005) as they overcame challenging situations. In spite of the obstacles that students encountered in their homes, in their communities, and on their campuses, they were not deterred from reaching their educational goals. One source of motivation that students identified was their ability to challenge any negative statistics and perceptions that exist toward their gender or their ethnicity. Another example of students' resistance was their mere acknowledgement that it would have been easier for them to quit and to abandon their studies, but they would not do so. As students reflected on their experiences as first-generation college students, they understood that the hard way was the only way for them to overcome obstacles. This section provides examples of students exhibiting resistance capital (Yosso, 2005) to obtain their college degrees.

Challenging Negative Statistics and Perceptions

Several students in this study indicated that a source of their motivation came from their desire to push back against the negative perceptions and statistics that exist against the Latinx community. Students acknowledged that the cultural deficit model is often used against them by educators, peers, and community members and despite that being the case, they have resisted those views and used them as sources of encouragement for themselves. Lily specifically acknowledged this by stating:

I always keep my parents in mind and like the statistics and certain mentalities that Latinos have where women are supposed to quote unquote, stay in the kitchen and pop babies like Skittles. That's not me. I want to get my education. I want to go so far in life that like Bianca said earlier, it's not us just graduating. It's our parents, too. I feel like that's what keeps me grounded most of the time. I've always been a very self-motivated person so I'm always like, we have to do this. There are so many stigmas and so many statistics that I want to break.

Lily identifies traditional gender roles and limited access to higher education by previous family members as contributing to challenging perceptions placed on her. In spite of this assumption, Lily is using her education to combat those pre-existing notions of what others may believe that she should be doing with her life. By obtaining a college degree, Lily expressed that she is honoring her parents' sacrifices for her to get to this point in her life while also disputing negative views against her culture and her gender. Lily also indicated that she used those factors, coupled with her own motivation, to complete her academic program.

Along with that perception, students also identified limited Latinx role models in their respective fields as a challenge for them. Juliet and Luna specifically stated that

during the tours of their clinical rotation sites, they did not encounter any Latinx medical professionals. During a member check session, Frida, who is also going into a healthcare program, added humor to some advice that she shared with them and said: “Juliet & Luna, don’t be surprised when you get confused for a janitor.” When Frida shared this information, all of the students and I laughed. Frida laughed longer than the rest of us and then admitted that she shared that piece of advice because this very thing happened to her while she worked as a nursing assistant. While this was humorous during the member check session, it was also an observation of the limited perceptions that are often placed on Latinx individuals. It is also important to note that these students realized that and used humor as a source of resilience. Horhn’s (2020) study of Black women utilizing humor to alleviate unpleasant racial and ethnic encounters found that, “humor was used to ease racial tensions, correct racial assumptions, thwart impeding microaggressions, strengthen bonds, and emphasis general absurdity” (p.167). Horhn’s findings align with Frida’s use of humor to forewarn Juliet and Luna of what they may encounter, while also dealing with her own experience with microaggressions, in the medical profession.

After a few moments of laughter, Juliet responded to Frida by saying that she, too, had such negative experiences when she worked as a nursing assistant that now served as motivation for her. Juliet reflected and said:

I first worked as a nursing assistant and one of the reasons that I quit is because my coworkers looked down on me and they made me feel stupid. I was like, I’m not stupid! They made me feel like I wasn’t supposed to be there. It’s a terrible feeling but that’s where you get your motivation. I’m gonna prove you wrong. When I graduate, I’m gonna go back to my old floor and say, ‘hey guys, I’m about to go into surgery.’

There are several components of Juliet's response that we can unpack, all of which speak to her reasons for beginning and completing her academic program. Aside from finding motivation in her parents' emigration to the United States, Juliet uses her unpleasant experiences as a nursing assistant to prove to herself, and to her former coworkers, that she is capable of accomplishing what she set out to do. Not only does Juliet use that unpleasant experience to motivate her but she also uses the moment where she can return to visit those old coworkers after she has completed her program to prove them wrong.

Another factor that drives students' resistance is their willingness to challenge how their bilingual abilities are often looked down upon. Samantha mentioned that English is not her first language, and her accent often causes negative looks from people:

One of my motivations is to prove people wrong. Sometimes they think we're dumb because we have broken English, but they do too and it's their only language. All of the words that you know in English, I have twice as many because I can translate them!

While her accent when pronouncing certain words has been viewed as a deficit, she countered that by stating that some native English speakers also mispronounce words and use broken English. Samantha then clarified that her word bank consists of twice as many words as individuals who are not bilingual. Samantha's response allows us to understand how she recognizes her linguistic capital and how she views that as a source of resistance (Yosso, 2005).

Through the examples provided in this section, students established how they are actively using their determination, their genders, and their bilingual abilities as forms of resistance in education. Although these aspects of their identities may often be viewed

from a deficit perspective, the students in this study demonstrated how these factors serve as strengths and as a source of motivation for them. Students' stories serve as a way for educators to understand and to recognize how these identity markers fuel their desire to obtain their college degrees.

It's Easier to Quit, but I Won't

All students faced challenging situations; in many of the examples they provided, several students said that it would have been much easier to simply quit. However, the students in this study demonstrated that despite that being the easier option, they resisted doing so. On the contrary, they embraced the challenges and converted their responses to these challenges into their sources of capital. In my interview with Frida, she described the unpleasant dealings with her community college dating back to being physically removed from her courses and during her attempt to re-enroll. This experience came back up during our member check and when asked about not giving up, she responded that the clinical rotations in her nursing assistant class were from 8AM-6PM and that she worked the night shift at a full-time job. During that semester, Frida only slept about two hours while also having to do homework for her class. Frida looked back at that time in her life and stated, "I'm not sure how I did it" and as she reflected on that stressful semester, she shared that "I can't just quit trying to get into the nursing program after going through that." She followed that up by saying that she had already invested too much time and money to simply walk away from her goal of becoming a nurse. Frida's commitment to becoming a nurse demonstrates how *Ganas/Perseverance Wealth* (Kanagala et al., 2016) serves as a source of resilience and determination to make her dream a reality.

Just about every student in this study shared that there were several instances where they were discouraged by the obstacles they faced, yet they were not deterred from pursuing their educational goals. Bianca explained that having to pay out-of-state tuition while also not being allowed to enroll in a healthcare program was a low point in her life where she could have easily given up:

I'm probably going to still help and find other groups that I'm able to help the community because I wanted to be a nurse *pero todos los sueños se rompen* [all dreams are broken]. But hopefully in the future I'm going to be able to be a nurse and have a paper saying that I'm certified as a Spanish interpreter.

Bianca explained that her lack of U.S. citizenship does not allow her to become a nurse, which caused her to feel as if her dreams were shattered. However, as we learned in the previous chapter and in this quote, Bianca's commitment to and involvement in her community was only exacerbated by her own challenges. Several students indicated that they made commitments to themselves, to their families, and to their communities that serve as intrinsic motivation for them to academically succeed. When asked about what kept Carla motivated as she faced challenges in her education, she stated:

Well, I think it's an everyday battle. I would say it's not easy and I want everything to go smoothly or great but sometimes it doesn't. What I try to do is remember why I'm doing it. I cannot do it now and then five years from now, I'll be in the same restaurant working. Or I can suffer and enjoy these five years studying and then in five years I could have a job that will help me.

Through this explanation we understand that Carla's determination to overcome every obstacle that she faced came from her desire for a better future. Carla explained that while it was easier to abandon her studies, she focused on the vision that she set for her

eventual career. Carla also framed her dedication in a way that portrayed time passing as inevitable, and her pursuit of a college degree will better position her in life in the years ahead.

The participants were able to see the potential long-term payoff to forgo what would be temporary relief from pain and challenges if they quit, but they would not do so. Students remained focused on what drove them to begin their college degrees and recalled those personal factors as they overcame difficult situations. Rather than succumbing to the challenges they encountered, students honed their determination and their resilience to guide them through any barriers they faced.

The Hard Way was the Only Way

As students reflected on their experiences, several indicated that having to learn things and to experience them the hard way was the only way for them to do so. Given the limited access to formal resources students in this study identified throughout the educational pipeline, students had to overcome obstacles by learning things the hard way. When this observation was presented to students during the member check sessions, Juliet immediately spoke up and said that in her experience, the hard way was truly the only way. Juliet also shared that “people think that community colleges are easier than universities but definitely not for me.” After what Juliet went through to get to where she is in her program, she explained that there was never an easy part of her story.

A similar observation could be made after hearing about all of the challenges that other students in this study encountered. When asked about this, Juan stated:

The system really sets everything up so that you will have a challenge, a door that you have to break in every step of the way, just to get in and just to get started. You're gonna come across a door and there's nobody on the other side of the door that's going to open the door for you. You have to figure it out. You can either work smarter or work harder. You can either break the door down or you can find the key. Most times you have to break the door down. You can try to find a key but that's almost impossible and you usually have the lowest probability possible. Or you can break in. Knock it down. Sometimes that's the only option.

The imagery in Juan's observation of his experiences portrays an educational pipeline that is systematically designed to preclude Latinx students from easily navigating it.

Through Juan's explanation of the challenges students face, we understand how some Latinx students view the formal education system. However, rather than abandoning their studies when faced with said challenges, much like Juan, students demonstrated navigational capital by acknowledging that at times, you must "break the door down" in order to move forward through this system (Yosso, 2005).

In this section, students shared the personal factors that they turned to as they faced challenging situations as first-generation college students. Their experiences provide examples where students did not shy away from various obstacles but instead, they demonstrated resistance capital as they dealt with them (Yosso, 2005). In their pursuit of a college degree and in their plans to pursue certain careers, several students acknowledged a lack of ethnic representation for them to view as role models. This reality also came with pre-existing negative statistics and traditional gender roles in their homes, communities, and eventual careers. The desire to combat these statistics and perceptions drove students to push forward and to overcome these barriers, rather than to simply give up. While that was often the easiest route to take, and one that offered

momentary reprieve, the students in this study remained focused on their long-term goals. Although students indicated that experiencing these difficulties the hard way was the only way for them to navigate higher education, their commitment to refuting external limitations placed upon them served as intrinsic motivation during those challenging times.

Resilience

Having established how navigational and resistance capital influences Latinx students as they pursue their educational goals, I will now highlight how the students in this study incorporated *ganas/perseverance* wealth as evidenced by their resilience (Kanagala et al., 2016). Throughout the previous chapters we learned how students identified the challenges and support structures that they encountered as college students. Whether students realized it or not, they demonstrated their resilience throughout their resourcefulness as they circumvented the barriers placed before them. While Juan depicted the image of someone metaphorically breaking down a door, the students in this study did that very thing in a multitude of ways.

Generating My Own Resources

Since the majority of students expressed having limited access to formal resources on their campuses, students responded to that reality by generating their own resources. This notion was introduced in the previous chapter when students referenced how informal networks have served as sources of support for them. However, rather than this coming about by happenstance, students actively worked to create these networks where resources were found and shared. For example, Juan explained that he paid out-of-state

tuition for his first year of college and during a visit to his campus' student success center, he learned that he could obtain a business sponsorship through his employer and in turn, eliminated a major financial barrier and stressor in his life. Juan described this transition in his college experience as:

They would pay the thousand and some change for my classes, which was awesome. I only had to work one one job and I was sleeping more. I actually had a social life for the first time after high school. I loved it. I was like, yo, this is a great setup. Time to finish school.

Through this response, Juan conveys how “finding a key” dramatically altered his approach to affording his education. While Juan was extremely grateful to have learned of this option, he wondered why he was not made aware of this sooner. Juan took the initiative to look for and to find resources and his resourcefulness paid off in many ways for him. Juan demonstrated how navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) allowed him to maneuver through institutional challenges that presented a financial obstacle for him.

Choosing My Major

One way that students demonstrated their resourcefulness was how they navigated their own paths to end up in their current majors. Despite most campuses offering formalized career exploration services, those services were either never presented to or never accessed by the majority of students in this study. On the contrary, several students expressed personal reasons for choosing their career paths. Rey shared that her mother's dream was to become a nurse and that Rey was working on meeting the admission requirements for the nursing program to fulfill her, and her mother's, dreams. Juliet and Yessica worked as a nursing assistant and as a phlebotomist, respectively, and learned

more about healthcare programs and options available to them. Bianca always dreamt of becoming a nurse but due to her lack of legal status, is prohibited from this by federal law. As a result, Bianca found another way to contribute to her community until she can become a nurse. Although that is her current reality, Bianca found a way to continue working toward her ultimate goal. Bianca is actively involved in her community, which contributes to her resilience.

Special Routes and Special Solutions

An important aspect of several students' experiences was their understanding that in order for them to reach their academic goals, they acknowledged that it would occasionally involve them "taking special routes and finding special solutions" (Juan). In Frida's time from initial to current enrollment as she worked toward her goal, there were several scenarios where she had to find "special solutions" for her situation. Yessica shared that at one point in her time at the early college, "we would all have to wake up at 5 AM so that we could share the car and get everywhere that we needed to be." In order for Yessica's family to fulfill all of their commitments, they all had to work together daily to coordinate their commutes with a shared vehicle. These students' examples show that there are not many components of the educational pipeline that facilitate the progression for Latinx students. However, through their determination and their resilience, Latinx students collectively broke through the doors before them and found ways to move forward.

Mental Health and Stability

Having established that mental health is important but not always recognized in many Latinx households, several students indicated that they found ways of caring for themselves. Lily explained that her campus offered free mental health services and she was able to take advantage of that, which positively influenced her resilience. The rest of the students also generated their own responses to preserving their mental health while juggling all of their responsibilities. During a member check session, Samantha mentioned that one step she took was to stay off social media. Samantha also “asked my friends and family members to not discuss any social media posts in front of me.” Juliet agreed that she, too, made this decision because she noticed that it only added stress to her life. Juliet stated:

Just like Samantha, my ‘special route and special solution’ was to get off social media because that’s a great way to kill your mental health because everyone is doing everything good. They’re in Cancun or something and you’re just like, oh. But I realized that I need to stop comparing myself to other people because they don’t have to deal with the same stuff that I’m going through. And it’s a good way to have a lot more study time.

Juliet admitted that she compared herself to others but came to the realization that those people did not encounter the same challenges that she had to overcome. She noticed a relief in not having this added pressure that she inadvertently placed on herself and had more time to study. Juliet also mentioned that she began writing in a journal, which served as a positive outlet for her to process and to express her feelings.

As Juan navigated his first year of college while juggling a full-time and a part-time job to pay his out-of-state tuition, the stress became too much for him. Juan met with

a close friend who was also a DACA recipient and who had managed to earn a college degree. Juan admitted to Salvy that it was all too much for him and that he would have a lot less stress in his life if he just quit college and became a plumber. Salvy saw the stress and frustration in Juan and told him that he needed to take some time to focus on himself. He also recommended that Juan call out of work for two days to simply rest, take care of himself, and do things that he enjoyed doing. Juan described how this advice positively influenced his well-being as:

I literally turned off my phone for those 48 hours straight. I turned it off and I just focused on one thing, which was myself and that really got me through that semester. I'll tell you that much, those two days is what got me through that semester. If it wasn't for Salvy telling me to do that and if it wasn't for those two days, I would have dropped out and I wouldn't have had my degree in about a month. So, those two days saved the whole career.

Having someone acknowledge his challenges while also focusing on his mental health was critical to Juan's academic progress. Through this piece of advice, Juan strengthened his resilience for the remainder of his academic studies, and he now makes sure to share that valuable information with other Latinx students.

Ganas/Perseverance

Through these students' examples we see how students have demonstrated their resilience by incorporating ganas/perseverance capital into their lives (Kanagala et al., 2016). Students identified the limitations and negative perceptions that exist for their ethnicity and their gender, yet through their education, they incorporate resistance capital to push back on those assumptions (Yosso, 2005). Through their determination, students generated their own resources that resulted in their continued success. While these

aspects of students' stories have proven to be instrumental to them, their commitment to their communities play as big of a role, if not bigger, in their success and I expand on that in the next section.

I am Interconnected with My Community

In this section, I explain how students' academic success in college was not a selfish endeavor but, instead, was for the betterment of their communities. The students in this study identified how sharing their resources with other Latinx students in their respective communities was critical for them. This was a source of capital and of wealth that students articulated as motivation for their resilience as they encountered and overcame various challenges.

Sense of Community: My Struggles Don't have to be Your Struggles

As I coded students' responses, there was a common theme that presented itself in almost every one of the interviews. While students had previously mentioned the importance of their communities to them, students identified how their educational goals were interconnected with their cultural and geographical communities. Kanagala et al. (2016) identified this as a source of capital for Latinx students and explained it as, "This ethnic consciousness manifested in students' deep commitment to give back to their families and communities and in their sense that personal accomplishment could benefit the Latino/a collective whole" (para. 13). This was evident in how students in this study expressed their desire to use their experiences and their future college degrees for the betterment of their respective communities. Not once did a student indicate that their

degree was solely for their benefit; instead, they shared how their communities were an integral part of their educational and professional plans.

Several students shared that their identity markers and others who identified as Latinx were critical to their educational goals. Samantha specifically stated that she wanted to help and to see more Latinx students be successful because “we are all one big family.” Juan also touched on this when he explained how informal networks of shared languages and values are sources of capital for Latinx communities, which aligns with Samantha’s perspective. Students indicated that it was because of this cultural connection and sense of community that they utilized and shared navigational and social capital with other Latinx students (Yosso, 2005). Through their lessons learned “the hard way”, the students in this study wanted to help other Latinx students so that they do not become overwhelmed by the same challenges. When asked about this pattern in students’ responses, Bianca stated:

The struggles that I’ve faced, I wouldn’t want anyone else to go through. As I learn things, I can be a helper for others in ways that the school doesn’t. I’d rather share all of my knowledge with someone else so that they don’t struggle in the ways that I did.

Bianca acknowledged her hardships and clarified that she does not want other students to have to experience those same struggles. Bianca identified how her accrual of resources is for the benefit of her community, which connects with her involvement in community organizations.

One way that students took it upon themselves to ensure that other Latinx students do not encounter their same challenges was through the sharing of resources. As students

in this study learned of ways to find a key and to not have to “break the door down” (Juan), they then immediately held the door open for another Latinx student. Juan mentioned that as soon as he learned that a student at Bridge CC was a DACA recipient, he would make sure that they were aware of the business sponsorship tuition option available to them through their employer. Juan remembered having to stumble upon this resource after juggling two jobs and a full-time, out-of-state tuition course load and did not wish that stress on anyone else. Juan reflected that he “had to take a hard hit but in the future, other DACA recipients that I meet will not.”

Samantha learned early on during her time at Partnership CC that she had access to the campus veteran’s center, but others did not. Rather than ignoring that fact, she offered to help students gain indirect access to this campus resource that has been extremely helpful for her. When Samantha sees a student having trouble with something, she tells them, “I’ll be the bridge. I’ll act like it’s my problem to get you the answers and the help that you need.” By offering her classmates this type of support, Samantha demonstrated that whatever resources she had access to were shared resources to benefit others.

Given the enrollment hardships that Frida has encountered as a student at Partnership CC, she has been a student there long enough to learn about resources available to her. At one point, two of Frida’s nieces were having issues with getting responses from employees in various enrollment related departments and they became so frustrated that they were about to give up. One of them reached out to Frida who proceeded to teach them about their college’s web portal where she taught them how to

look for classes, how to check on seats available in courses they needed, how to register themselves, as well as checking on their Financial Aid statuses. Her nieces were then able to complete every required step and asked Frida if she'd be willing to help one of their friends who was also having the same issues. When Frida's nieces asked her how she learned about these online resources, she responded, "sometimes when they ask me and say, 'how do you know how to do it?' I'm like, it's so easy. And then I think to myself, Oh, never mind. I had to go through different steps to learn." Frida essentially taught them to navigate their enrollment processes while bypassing individuals on campus who, technically, were supposed to do that for students. Frida's nieces became frustrated with the complicated processes and with the lack of communication from the college, but Frida's use of social capital contributed to the students being able to successfully enroll in college (Yosso, 2005).

Aside from the sharing of resources, there is also a source of direct encouragement that Latinx students have been for each other. This was something I observed in the three paired depth interviews, and I asked the students to confirm it during the member check sessions. Rey and Yessica were in their interview together and while Yessica was in the last year of her health science program and Rey was still taking the prerequisite courses, Yessica spoke to Rey by saying "when you become a nurse" several times, almost as if she was speaking it into existence for her. During the member check, I asked Yessica about this and she laughed and said "*¡ya sabes!*" [you already know!] and I could not help but laugh as well. I asked her what she meant by that, and she said that "as Latinos we have to push each other forward" and that really speaks to

this notion of shared successes (Yessica). Through her choice of words, Yessica was essentially motivating and encouraging Rey to reach her, and her mother's, dreams of Rey becoming a nurse.

This was not unique to my interview with Yessica because I asked the other students about this during the member checks. All the students acknowledged that they were excited and proud to see other Latinx students being successful. After the recording ended during a member check session and as we were about to log out of the virtual meeting, Samantha told Frida, Juliet, and Luna:

I know that I just met you all but just know that you're killing it and you're going to do great in your careers. I look forward to going to the doctor as a patient and being able to ask for you.

Samantha admitted that she met the other students for the first time during the member check session but also offered words of encouragement to let them know that despite the challenges they faced and overcame, she did not have a doubt that they would succeed in their careers. This was a completely different member check and unprompted, Samantha expressed the same encouragement and support to Frida, Juliet, and Luna that Yessica did to Rey. This notion of shared success also came up during the initial round of interviews, when Lily explained what it meant to her to see Latinx students being successful in college:

I feel empowered because I had never seen so many Latinos in general just wanting to go to school. I met so many while I was on campus before COVID and it was encouraging to have this group of people that look like you that want to do something, that want to be more than what they've been told or more than what they've been taught. That's always meant something to me. But when I see Latina

women killing it, I'm like, oh, you go girl! It's empowering. I can't describe it. It just feels really good because being the first-gen student and you are the oldest and you are female, you don't get that same empowerment at home. You know what I mean? It's different. But when I'm in school, I was surrounded by all these Latina girls that wanted to be doctors and wanted to be nurses. It's like, yes, you go queen! Like, you do you. [laughing & clapping hands with every syllable from 'yes, you go queen....do you' for emphasis] It's just, it's a great feeling and that's how I can explain it. [laughing]

Lily's response captured a sense of community and of solidarity as she saw Latinx students, especially females, pursuing college degrees. Lily conveyed pride and reinforced the concept of shared success that Yessica and Samantha expressed as important to them and to their Latinx community members. Through these students' responses, it was evident that students are truly interconnected with their cultural and geographical communities and in the next section, we will explore why this is such a critical component of their and others' experiences.

Representation for My Community

During my interviews with students, I asked about the challenges that they have faced as well as what kept them motivated throughout those challenges. As previously mentioned, several students identified their families as sources of support and as reasons for continuing their education. Along with families, several students indicated that they actively wanted to change those situations that they found as challenging for them. Specifically, not having Latinx role models in their career fields was a source of motivation for many students so that other Latinx students could see them and know that they, too, could go into that career field.

Serving My Community

Lily shared that the lack of Latinx representation in her career and in her community are precisely what drove her to choose her major. Lily elaborated:

That's why I chose this specific career because I look at the law enforcement field, I look inside a cop car and there's nobody in there that looks like me. It's always males and they're always white. I've always looked up to these people, but they don't look like me. What if one day I come across a little girl, and she looks like me? That opportunity to have someone that looks up to me, that's like, 'I want to be in this field because I see more people that look like me in this career.' I want to break that stigma of that male dominance within that career. I just want to make a change.

Through this response, we understand that not only does Lily have a personal reason for wanting to go into law enforcement but for a communal benefit as well. Lily's career choice is not solely for Lily's personal gain but instead, for that of future Latina students who she has never even met. Lily acknowledged that there is not enough Latina representation in her career field but also confronted that challenge through her commitment to serve her community. Lily's drive and motivation is an active form of resistance to the status quo and an example of ethnic consciousness wealth (Kanagala et al., 2016).

When asked about their communities during the member check sessions, several students agreed that this was important to them. Juan explained it as, "when the Latino community works and helps each other, it creates a domino effect. I had to take a hard hit but, in the future, others will not." Juan acknowledged his challenges and absorbed that as part of his experience but also explained that through his sharing of resources, others

will not be deterred by those same challenges. This demonstrates how the sharing of resources creates momentum for other Latinxs to succeed.

I'm the First of Many More to Come

Through their resilience, several students' experiences demonstrated that their success was shared success for others. Students are actively challenging limited Latinx representation in their career fields and are pursuing their degrees so that their friends and family members will know that they, too, can obtain a college degree. When asked about this observation during a member check session, Juliet confirmed this reality for her and compared her experiences to that of the dominant culture in the U.S.:

White people are very different from Mexicans because their parents are already set. They're already alumni from such and such college and they know, my parents did it so I can do it, too. My parents aren't alumni from anywhere. I want my kids to look up to me like that white person's kids do. So, that's where I come in and I'm the first of many more to come for my generation.

Juliet's observation depicts the differences between her experiences navigating higher education and that of a white classmate. Despite that being her reality, Juliet established how that will change for her family through the successful completion of her academic program.

Luna explained how her younger sister and cousins were sources of motivation for her and how she shared her knowledge with them. One of her cousins is currently applying to the same early college that Luna attended, and Luna helped serve on interview committees after her time in that program. So, Luna scheduled mock interviews with her cousin to prepare for the questions and the environment that she would

encounter as she applied to this competitive program. Luna mentioned that she enjoyed being able to help her cousin but also wondered, “what if someone doesn't have a cousin like me to ask for help?” This is the reality that many Latinx students face but the students in this study are using their knowledge and immediately sharing it to benefit others. Yessica agreed that this was important to her as well and when asked why, she stated that, “It’s a sense of community that we want to help each other stand up and to push each other forward.” Yet again, this demonstrates a desire to help others obtain a college education while limiting any potential challenging situations for them. Yessica’s response indicates a willingness to help other Latinx students look toward the future through a college degree while also serving as a support structure to help them along the way.

In this section, we learned that students’ cultural and geographical communities are integral to their resilience as they encounter and overcome challenges as first-generation college students. Through their shared cultural connection to other Latinxs, students found ways to encourage and to motivate other Latinx students in an effort to ensure their academic success. The sharing of resources and the celebrating of academic accomplishments were specific ways that the students in this study contributed to their communities. The ability to combat limited perceptions and representation in their career fields demonstrated both resistance capital (Yosso, 2005) and ethnic consciousness wealth (Kanagala et. al., 2016), both of which drove students’ resilience.

Recommendations for Future Latinx Students

Given the importance that Latinx students in this study placed on helping other Latinx students in their communities, I asked the participants to reflect on their experiences and to share advice for future Latinx students. The participants took a moment to reflect on their experiences and provided several recommendations for Latinx students about to graduate from high school and who may consider attending a community college. Through their responses, students conveyed the same sense of encouragement and support that we have seen thus far, while also forewarning them of individual and institutional challenges that they may encounter along the way.

Find and Use Resources

One piece of advice that students communicated as critical to future Latinx students was that there are several resources available to them. However, while they may not be as easily accessible, it is extremely important for future students to find and to utilize those resources. Given the challenges listed from their own experiences, students shared that resources exist and that they should be utilized. One of the common responses about said challenges was paying for college so Juan recommended the following for future Latinx students:

When you go to campus for help, don't leave that office or department without getting the help you need because you have to use your resources! If I could get FAFSA, then I'd make sure that they helped me without getting the runaround because they can only kick you out when the office closes at the end of the workday. You might face prejudice, or not be treated like other students, but don't give up.

Through this response we understand that while Juan himself cannot access financial aid through the FAFSA, if he were able to do so, then Juan would make sure that college employees provided him with the detailed help that is required for obtaining financial aid. Juan also recommended that for those students who are eligible for financial aid, they should not be easily discouraged or turned away when seeking help. Juan shared an aspect of resistance capital with future students in that they should not be afraid to ask for help but instead, should expect to receive that help (Yosso, 2005).

Several other students also indicated that future students should not hesitate to ask people for help, whether that be on or off-campus. Yessica shared that one of her classmates taught her that she should prepare a list of questions before going into various departments when asking for help:

I would always go in there and I would prepare questions first. I would think about the topic, and I would write it down before I went in there. So, write down your questions before you go to that appointment and ask for help, you know, what would you recommend? Or what have you done? Because that's what they're there for.

This has proven to be very helpful for Yessica, and she recommended this approach for future Latinx students in hopes that it would help eliminate Latinx students leaving employees' offices without the help that they needed. She also qualified this piece of advice by stating that employees are essentially there to help students so future Latinx students should not hesitate to ask for help, and they should not be easily turned away.

Be Prepared for Challenges but Don't Give Up

Without wanting to sugarcoat what lies ahead, an important piece of advice that was shared was simply for Latinx students to be prepared to face challenging situations. Several students responded that while being a first-generation college student can at times feel like a lonely endeavor, they should rest assured that despite feeling that way, students should know that they are not alone. Virginia spoke about this feeling and shared, “knowing that you’re not alone is another part because sometimes you think that you’re the only person in this situation and you’re really not because there’s other people who are out there like you and you can do it.” Through this response, Virginia conveyed hope and solidarity for students who may feel like they are struggling alone.

Another suggestion for future Latinx students during those challenging times was for students to think back to what drove them to begin their programs. Everyone had motivating factors at that point and students should stay focused on those factors and not on the obstacles before them. Lily even referenced looking back at their childhood dreams to help during those difficult moments:

One thing that I always keep in mind is we were all once little kids and we all had hopes and dreams and when times get tough, you can't forget that little kid inside of you. It's important and at the same time, just don't think about anyone else. It's important to have these things that motivate you, but I think Bianca said at the end of the day, it's up to you how far you want to go. You can be given all the support in the whole entire world, but at the end of the day, it's up to you *cuánto le quieres echar ganas* [how much effort you want to put forth] but that's something that I would always say is, don't give up. Aside from keeping your parents in mind, your siblings or your whatever, always listen to you and your hopes and dreams and get that degree. It's, it's hard, but it's worth it. I mean, I've sometimes been doing homework and ugly crying, and I'm just like, I don't want to do this anymore, but I'm like, I have to. It's just something that we have to do.

Through this response, Lily demonstrated her resilience by focusing on her childhood aspirations of going into her career and used that as motivation to push forward during those challenging moments. Lily acknowledged having emotionally challenging moments while doing homework but obtaining her degree will allow her to help her family and her community in the ways that she has always dreamt of. Lily also recommended that students should put their external motivating factors aside and focus on themselves and to push forward for themselves. Lily stated that despite having several moments where she felt as if she simply did not want to continue her studies, she reminded herself of why she was in college, which helped her overcome those stressful moments.

After acknowledging these difficulties, the main point that students wanted to convey was for future Latinx students to not give up when they inevitably encounter obstacles. Ultimately, as Latinx students begin their academic journey, the participants wanted to ensure that future students would be proud of themselves. Understanding the challenges that future students will face during their pursuit of their educational goals should also serve as a source of pride for students, especially as they work to overcome them. This sharing of encouragement appears to be a way for them to support future Latinx students while also ensuring that they do not lose sight of their academic and professional goals. Through this advice, the students in this study shared aspirational and navigational capital with future Latinx students (Yosso, 2005). Despite the challenges faced during their times in college, students remained focused on the aspirations that they had for their futures. Along with those aspirations, were specific strategies to navigate

those challenges in hopes that future Latinx students will not encounter the same challenges that these students faced.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we became much more aware of how first-generation Latinx community college students utilized personal factors to overcome the various challenges that they encountered in higher education. This chapter was intended to emphasize how critical these personal factors are for Latinx students and that they should be celebrated. It was through the use of these personal factors that students demonstrated their willingness to resist against limitations projected onto them, while also exemplifying their own resilience in difficult moments where they could have easily abandoned their studies. Instead, students learned to use the challenges and negative perceptions from their experiences to fuel their desire to academically persist. Lily explained how she has had to combat traditional gender roles as she prepares for a career that she describes as not reflecting her gender or her ethnicity. Rather than simply accepting the status quo, Lily actively incorporates resistance capital as she defies the external perceptions placed on her (Yosso, 2005).

Although campuses and communities offer resources, the students in this study shared stories of how they often had to dig deep within themselves to overcome adversity. Students described several moments where they felt discouraged by the financial, gender, and ethnic representation challenges they faced, yet they were not deterred by them. Their determination to achieve their goals affirms what Kanagala et. Al. (2016) explain as *ganas*/perseverant wealth when, “students refused to quit, and they

also recognized and embraced the sacrifices they made in going to college.” This notion of *ganas*/perseverant wealth encapsulates the grit and the persistence that students reflected in the examples provided in this chapter. Along with their own experiences of working past their challenges and at times having to “break down doors”, students ensured that they then held the door open for other Latinx students to be able to walk through (Juan). Students incorporated the knowledge they accumulated while overcoming obstacles into the advice shared with other Latinx students with the hope of diminishing those same challenges for them. This pattern in students’ responses highlights the importance of social capital and their desire to help other students (Yosso, 2005).

Latinx students shared that the reasons for pursuing their educational goals were not solely for individual benefit but instead, for the collective betterment of their homes and of their respective communities. Through those shared resources there was also a sense of shared success when seeing other Latinx students working toward their careers. Lily described the sense of pride that she felt on her campus when seeing so many Latinx students defying negative perceptions as they, too, worked toward their educational goals. This directly connects with the ethnic consciousness wealth aspect that Kangala et. Al. (2016) describe as “this ethnic consciousness manifested in students’ deep commitment to give back to their families and communities and in their sense that personal accomplishment could benefit the Latino/a collective whole.” This sense of pride and solidarity in their ethnic and geographical communities was important to students because what they accomplish academically and professionally is to create opportunities for future Latinx students to know that they, too, can pursue and succeed in college.

Participants also provided recommendations for future first-generation Latinx college students. Within those recommendations was an emphasis on finding and utilizing resources available to them in order to prevent any unnecessary hardships. Students ended their recommendations with an optimistic note for future Latinx students by sharing specific ways that they should channel their energy and focus during stressful times to move past them. Through their recommendations, the students in this study shared aspirational and resistance capital with other Latinx students that they had not even met (Yosso, 2005). All of these elements combined portray how indispensable Community Cultural Wealth is for Latinx students as they actively work to “find keys” and to open doors to facilitate the access and the success of future Latinx college students (Juan).

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FINAL THOUGHTS

That's the best part about us. I'm not doing this for me. I'm not trying to put a piece of paper on my wall that says I accomplished this. I'm trying to make a difference for my community. I'm trying to make a difference for my family.
(Yessica)

When I began this study, I anticipated learning about the institutional and the personal factors that first-generation Latinx community college students identified as influential to them. I was fortunate to hear from 12 students at three different community colleges who made time to participate in this study and to share private details of their experiences with me. Through their stories, I learned alongside them about the challenges they encountered and the support structures they created to overcome them. I sought a balanced set of responses between the on and off-campus challenges and resources that students accessed as college students. In my professional experiences, I saw a need for increasing Latinx students accessing higher education through a community college, and I wanted to learn best practices from students. As a mid-level administrator at a community college, I approached this work as a practitioner who wanted to learn about support services that campuses should offer for Latinx students.

However, as I met with students, it became apparent that there were far more personal factors that were critical to students' academic success that have not been

formally recognized in academia. First-generation college students may often be viewed through a cultural deficit model lens, but through their stories, the students in this study framed their experiences as examples of determination and resilience. As students identified the systemic inequities they encountered, from leaving high school through graduating from their community colleges, they also provided direct responses on whether their needs were being met. Through these responses, students identified specific recommendations for community colleges to enhance their programs and services to benefit future Latinx students.

Research Questions, Purpose, and Findings

The research questions that guided this work were:

- 1) How do first-generation, Latinx students in North Carolina navigate their community college experiences?
- 2) What personal and institutional factors do first-generation, Latinx community college students identify as important to achieving their intended educational goals?
- 3) Based on their experiences at community colleges, what recommendations do Latinx students have for institutional leaders?

I used the LatCrit framework to analyze students' responses about their on-campus experiences and how their institutions influenced their progression through the traditional educational pipeline.

Campus Challenges

Participants from all three community colleges shared the following list of challenges they faced on their campuses:

- Not enough personalized help
 - Finding ways to pay for college
 - Choosing a major
- College employees don't look like or understand them

The first item on the list presents the aspect of students' experiences where several participants described a lack of personalized guidance during critical moments throughout the enrollment process. Juliet took dual enrollment classes at Alliance while still in high school and was verbally told that her successful completion of those courses qualified her for a program that covered the cost of her entire associate degree. However, as we learned from Juliet's experience, despite her calling, emailing, and physically going to the Financial Aid Office, she never received the financial assistance that she needed. Not only did she never receive the tuition waiver that she was promised, but she had to take a semester off to work and to save the money to pay for her tuition. Juliet expanded on this during the member check session and stated, "it angers you to have to run around. I have a job and a life outside of school so investing all of that time wasn't easy." She became so frustrated with the lack of help that she gave up trying to ask for it and decided to simply pay her tuition out of pocket every semester.

Bianca and Juan also discussed experiencing difficulties with affording their tuition. Bianca is an undocumented student, and Juan is a DACA recipient, which

requires them to pay out-of-state tuition. While Bianca was able to find a college employee to help with late registration issues that she faced due to her lack of citizenship, she was unable to find individualized financial assistance. Juan worked a full-time and a part-time job during his first year of college in order to pay his tuition, which resulted in physical and mental exhaustion. He learned about an employer sponsorship option from another student that alleviated a financial stressor for him and allowed him to leave one job to spend more time on his studies.

Four students in this study identified a lack of help with selecting their college majors as a challenge they experienced on their campuses. Juliet and Luna shared how they saw flyers promoting a health science program on their campus, which prompted them to research and to coordinate meetings with the program coordinator. Crystal mentioned how her friend group had several career exploration conversations, and she ended up selecting a major that would allow her to help others. Frida, Lily, and Rey enrolled in college with personal and familial reasons for already knowing what they planned to study.

Seven students in this study shared that they did not see their ethnicity reflected in the demographics of their campus employees. Students felt that having Latinx employees in various enrollment and academic advising roles would have allowed them to have a deeper, cultural connection with their campuses. Aside from the lack of ethnic representation on their campuses, students often felt that some employees simply did not make time to understand their situations. While Bianca and Juan struggled to afford their education, college employees often asked them if they had considered applying for

financial aid. This piece of advice may have been well-intended, but it was frustrating for Bianca and Juan since their limited legal status prevented them from receiving this type of aid.

While reviewing this list of challenges, we begin to see the correlation between these students' experiences and Alvarado (2017) and Perez Velez' (2018) findings of Latinx students' experiences at North Carolina community colleges. Specifically, the lack of personalized guidance from or cultural connection with employees presented challenging situations for many students. Their findings directly align with what Geertz Gonzalez and Morrison (2016) found in their study that demonstrated how "LatCrit provides a framework that calls into question the disconnect of students of color from their race, ethnicity, and culture in post-secondary settings" (p. 91). The students in this study confirmed that their interactions with college employees directly influenced their ability to easily navigate the enrollment process and their sense of belonging on their campuses.

Campus Supports

Having established the areas where campuses could improve their services for Latinx students, there were several occasions where students identified employees or services that positively impacted their academic progress. Students provided the following list of specific sources of support that they found on their campuses:

- Campus services
 - Veterans Affairs Centers on campus
 - Mental Health Services for students

- Employees as advocates and guides
 - Program Coordinators
 - Staff and faculty who made them feel they mattered

This list allows us to understand the campus services and specific employees that students indicated as supportive for them. The three students who had to access their campus Veterans Affairs Centers always had a designated person or a department to turn to for help. Virginia explained that she never experienced any confusion in the enrollment process because the campus VA center guided her through every step along the way. Samantha shared that the VA center on her campus was a resource for her well beyond enrollment, and she would go there whenever she had any issue whatsoever on campus. Samantha expanded on this by stating:

You know, it does take pressure off of me feeling like I have to do everything myself. So, it is definitely a relief. It really does take a little bit of weight off these shoulders cause these shoulders carry a lot of weight. [laughing]

Through this response, we understand how the ability to access the personalized help and guidance from the VA center alleviated stress for Samantha.

Lily learned at a critical point in her first semester of college that her campus offered free mental health services to their students. Lily admitted that juggling work, life, and school was difficult for her and felt like she had hit “rock bottom” to the point where she almost withdrew from college. She approached one of her instructors after class to explain that she could not continue to manage all of her on and off-campus responsibilities. Lily’s instructor explained the free mental health services, which

positively influenced her ability to remain in college. This campus service and faculty member served as resources that provided the support structure that Lily needed.

Several students identified their program coordinators as employees who showed a vested interest in their academic success. Crystal explained how her program coordinator advocated to the Financial Aid Department to find her an additional scholarship to cover all of her tuition. Virginia shared how her program coordinator found enough scholarship money to pay for a second associate degree for her, as well as enough assistance to also cover the cost of her textbooks. Juliet and Luna mentioned that their program coordinator invited recent graduates from their program to talk to the incoming cohort of students about their experiences in the program and in the workforce. These examples demonstrate how campuses have college employees uniquely positioned to provide financial and professional opportunities for Latinx students to be successful college students. The positive interactions with these employees made students feel as if they mattered to them. Lily stated that, “all I can think about is just being listened to, I just want to be heard.” Being heard and supported by campus employees facilitated students’ academic progress throughout academic and financial challenges that students encountered.

Recommendations

Building off of these campus support structures that students identified, they also shared ideas for enhancing the way that campuses serve students. Based on the challenging and supportive scenarios that students have experienced, they expressed the following recommendations for community colleges. While some of these suggestions

were already shared throughout the previous chapters and sections, I reiterated them here because students mentioned them during their first round interviews as well as in the member check sessions. Several students suggested that employees identify themselves as having been first-generation college students as a way to be more inclusive and accepting of them. Students also explicitly stated their recommendations on increasing the ethnic makeup of their employees to facilitate communication for families whose first language is not English, as well as to provide Latinx students with someone that they can culturally identify with on campus. Several students in this study identified having a cultural connection with and receiving personalized guidance from college employees as critical to their success. Students explained that having individuals on their campuses that they could count on for personalized guidance was integral in their ability to enroll and to remain in college. The enrollment process and the accessibility to academic and financial resources was a specific recommendation that students made for their campuses.

Off-Campus Challenges

After reviewing the on-campus aspects of students' experiences, I then used the Community Cultural Wealth framework to better understand how the personal and community factors both challenged and contributed to their academic and career success. Some of the challenges that students experienced were:

- Family's understanding of a job vs a career
- Mental health stigma in Latinx communities
- Not enough Latinx role models in their career fields

Some students shared that they experienced difficulties in having family members understand that their college degrees were long-term investments for their careers. This reality aligns with what Núñez et al. (2011) found in their study that identified the home's financial contributions as a factor that places many working-class students of color at risk of not completing their degree program. Students also expressed that having their mental health statuses understood or validated by family members was difficult for them. Once students dealt with these scenarios in their homes, they were then faced with not finding any, or enough, Latinx role models in their eventual careers. This could be attributed to the fact that, "Hispanics had lower levels of educational attainment than any other groups" as reported by ¡Excelencia in Education! (2015, p. 4). All three of these components presented off-campus obstacles that students had to navigate in order to reach their academic goals.

In spite of these challenges that students experienced, their responses indicated that there were a significantly higher number of resources and support structures found within their homes and communities than those found through their college campuses. Through their continued enrollment, the students are actively overcoming these challenges and shifting educational attainment statistics. For the Latinx students in this study, their families, communities, and identity markers were essential in their reasons for pursuing and for obtaining their college degrees.

Off-Campus Resources

Students described the following off-campus resources that provided them with the support they needed:

- Family's direct/indirect support
- Formal & Informal Community Networks

Students' families played an integral role in their reasons for becoming college students, as well as sources of encouragement and motivation as students faced difficulties. Gastic and Verdugo (2013) identified *familismo* and students' sense of loyalty and solidarity with their family members as heavily influential for Latinx students. This correlates with Yosso's (2005) notion of familial capital and how it serves as a source of wealth and of great value for Latinx students. Both of these descriptions depict the family as a vital source of strength and of support for first-generation college students, which was corroborated by the participants in this study. Juliet acknowledged her parents' immigration to the United States as a sacrifice they made to provide her with academic and professional opportunities, and she uses that as a source of motivation as she experiences difficulties. Luna's family celebrates her academic achievements, and they are actively involved in the skills portion of her health science program, which then prompted her father to pursue his own college degree.

One thing that was prevalent throughout the students' interviews was that Latinx students approach and succeed in higher education in a completely different way than the traditional U.S. individualistic approach. Although the dominant culture in the U.S. tends to be more individualistic, the students in this study shared that their purpose for obtaining a college degree was not solely for their own betterment. Not once did I hear how their degrees would translate into personal gains, but instead, students identified their families and their communities as the beneficiaries of their academic

accomplishments. Yessica's quote at the beginning of this chapter portrays academic achievement as something that is not for her personal benefit but instead, for that of her family and community's benefit. Yessica's view of the purpose of her education encapsulates the value and genuine capital that the Community Cultural Wealth framework allows us to understand about many Latinx students (Yosso, 2005).

This notion of shared success is precisely how I came up with the title for this dissertation. Almost every student in this study explained that removing barriers for future Latinx students was just as important to them as their own accomplishments. Many students specifically indicated that they did not want other Latinx students to encounter the same challenges that they had to overcome. Through the sharing of their stories and their recommendations, the students in this study essentially provided a roadmap for future students to utilize their aspirational, social, navigational, and resistance capital (Yosso, 2005). One underlying point throughout many students' stories was that facing challenges would be inevitable but that students should not lose hope and that they should remain focused on their educational goals. The sharing of capital from one group of students to another with the sole intention of helping them to avoid discouraging moments demonstrates the Ethnic Consciousness Wealth (Kanagala et al., 2016) found with many of the Latinx students in this study. Kanagala et al. (2016) define this as "shared experiences of social and educational inequity may foster solidarity among Latino/a students." This was evident when Juan stated that "when the Latino community works and helps each other, it creates a domino effect" which is exactly what students initiated through their participation in this research.

Through their resilience, many Latinx students will actively combat the limited ethnic representation in their respective career fields and in turn, create opportunities for future Latinx students. That is how this study differs from those that I found in the existing literature. Although several studies focused on first-generation Latinx college students, even at community colleges across the U.S. and in North Carolina, this study placed greater emphasis on the students, their resistance, and their resilience. Rather than solely focusing on the traditional student support services (e.g., academic advising, affordability, availability of campus resources) that I initially sought to learn, the students in this study revealed that personal and off-campus resources were far more influential to their academic success than any program or service found on their campuses. That is precisely why the data analysis processes resulted in an entire chapter of this work being dedicated to this aspect of students' experiences. Their stories articulated that their determination to earn their degrees and their dedication to share those benefits with their families and communities, provided them with intrinsic motivation to navigate the intricacies that are found in higher education.

Implications for Future Research

At the time of this research, this work was the first qualitative study that focused on first-generation Latinx community college students in North Carolina. While it may have been the first of its kind, there were limitations that I encountered when conducting student interviews. There are also additional aspects of students' experiences that I feel future researchers should consider.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that I was only able to coordinate the participation of 12 students from three different community colleges. I initially set a goal of meeting with 30 students and targeted 1,786 students with my recruitment email. I awaited an influx of students' responses but the reality of virtual learning for college courses, juggling life's responsibilities, and then volunteering for virtual interviews for this study, during a global pandemic, was not conducive for many students. A second limitation of this study was that the three community colleges selected were all located in the central part of the state. There could be factors that are unique to other regions of the state whereas the colleges in this study were chosen for professional connections that I initially hoped would contribute to an increase in student participation. A third limitation was that I planned for all of the data to be collected through focus groups, but with a smaller sample size and with being mindful of their schedules, the majority of the data collected was through individual and paired depth interviews. I hoped for more interaction amongst the participants throughout both rounds of interviews, but due to the participants' scheduling limitations, I ended up conducting six individual interviews.

While I acknowledge these limitations, they in no way, shape or form take anything away from the 12 students who participated in this research. On the contrary, they made me appreciate and value their time commitments to this work, which I feel reiterates the importance of their Ethnic Consciousness Wealth (Kanagala et al., 2016). The students received a recruitment email from a Latinx graduate student asking for help conducting research on Latinx students' experiences, and they quickly volunteered to

help. In spite of all of their existing commitments that contribute to challenging situations, the students in this study made time to engage in this research and shared their stories with me.

Future Directions

Throughout the various iterations of my literature review, I came to experience mixed feelings as I found the “gap” in the existing research on first-generation Latinx students’ experiences at North Carolina community colleges. I was excited to begin this work to address said “gap” but also wondered why this work had not been done before. Although I may be one of the first contributors to the conversation on Latinx students’ experiences at North Carolina community colleges, it is my sincere hope that more educators and researchers conduct additional qualitative research to hear directly from students. Alvarado (2017) began the conversation and conducted a study that focused on how academic advising influences Latinx students’ experiences at North Carolina community colleges. Perez Velez’ (2018) then surveyed Latinx students at one community college where he asked students about their cultural connections with their campus. This work then built upon their findings and directly interviewed first-generation Latinx students about the on and off-campus challenges and support structures that have influenced their experiences. Through the nuances revealed in the students’ responses, we learned that students rely on personal factors to navigate higher education. Students revealed that their families, their communities, and their own desires for a better future drove students to overcome any adversity they encountered.

One important factor to consider is how students in this study circumvented institutional barriers to accomplish their educational goals. This was critical to their success and replicating their approaches around said challenges could empower other Latinx students to maintain their resilience in their academic studies. If Latinx students come to community college campuses with this understanding that their academic progress is shared with others, then how can institutions incorporate this into their student support services? Geertz Gonzalez and Morrison's (2016) study found that, "Education serves as a site of tension for students of color because of its ability to expand opportunity on one hand and create oppressive situations on the other" (p. 91). As institutions establish and review campus initiatives, it would behoove them to include student voices, specifically Latinx students, whose stories have the potential to positively impact the experiences of future Latinx students. This would be an effective strategy for administrators to engage in on their campuses in order to hear directly from students as they design and implement various campus policies and programs. Having campuses hire Latinx students to participate in these efforts would reflect a greater commitment to learning from students while also empowering them to positively influence the experiences for future Latinx students.

As I was conducting this research, I heard from many of the participants that they had not been involved in many campus activities or organizations. Of the 12 participants, Crystal was the only student who had been involved in a campus organization, which she said positively influenced her experiences as a student at Alliance CC. Future research could be conducted to learn more about factors that encourage or preclude Latinx

students from participating in activities or events on their campuses. Given how many students in this study explained how giving back to their communities was important, service-oriented campus organizations could encourage more Latinx student participation. This was an aspect of campus interactions that 11 students were not engaged in but many of these students did express the desire to help other students and their communities. Another consideration for futures studies is that all of the students in this study were from working class families. Additional research focusing on the nuances of class status, recognizing there is a continuum of working-class lived experiences, could be conducted to see how class affects first-generation Latinx community college students' experiences.

Additional research could also be conducted on how and why campuses are able to provide personalized guidance and services to military veterans but not for many other groups of students, such as first-generation college students. What type of resources do campuses allocate to offer support tailored to military veterans' enrollment and academic success that they could expand to other populations of students? How could community colleges replicate these services to serve non-military veteran students? Several students in this study would have experienced fewer stressful moments navigating new scenarios as first-generation college students if they had access to the type of services provided by campus veteran centers.

Final Thoughts

I consider myself fortunate to have been entrusted with sensitive aspects of students' stories and in turn, felt a sense of duty and honor to help tell their stories. This

became evident as I began coding the interviews and realized that I was uniquely positioned to facilitate their experiences into a document that could influence my fellow educators and administrators. Sharing the initial findings with students during the member check sessions confirmed the richness of students' stories, especially when two of the sessions lasted over 2 hours. These lengthy sessions contributed to additional details coming to light, as well as allowing us to understand the connections between their examples, across all three community colleges. I started this research wanting to teach non-Latinx educators about what "they" needed to know about Latinx students, and I, too, ended this work with a much better understanding of the off-campus strengths that the Community Cultural Wealth framework allowed us to acknowledge from students' stories. I felt that my role in this work shifted from that of a facilitator of students' stories to a co-creator of the knowledge and richness that exists within Latinx homes and communities.

While all of the interviews and member check sessions afforded me the opportunity to learn from students, there was one particular moment that solidified my commitment to this work. As I was ending the very last member check session with Yessica, I explained that much like the students in this study had established that their academic success was shared with their families and communities, my own progress through this doctoral program was an effort to also help my own Latinx family and community. Yessica smiled and said, "*representando para la raza*/representing for the race" and that really resonated with me. I understand from a personal, professional, and an academic perspective that ethnic representation matters but to hear this acknowledged

in my Spanish language was empowering. I wrote about this in my reflective notes journal and the entry after this interview says, “I can, and I will finish this Ph.D. For us.” So, I did.

Much like the students in this study revealed that their families and respective communities served as motivation for achieving their educational goals, that has also been a driving force for me throughout this doctoral program. I enrolled in this program because I grew up in a rural community with a growing Latinx population, but with few Latinx professionals to look up to. I also had not met any Latinx community college administrators in North Carolina, so just like Juliet said, “that’s where I come in, and I’m the first of many more to come for my generation.” The successful completion of this degree is not solely for my personal benefit, but to ensure that I “break the door down” in higher education and then turn around and hold the door open for others (Juan). I want to make sure that my family and community members know that they, too, can access and succeed in college because my progress is our progress.

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APPENDIX A.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) Think back to when you first thought about going to college; tell me about any help that you received planning for and applying to college. What made you decide to attend _____ Community College? Describe any help that you received from a college employee. What about from a family or community member?
- 2) I am now going to ask you about your educational goals. Please tell me what your plans are for when you leave _____ Community College. Explain what made you decide on that particular goal. How do you remain focused on this goal?
- 3) How do you feel being a Latinx student on this campus? What type of clubs or student organizations have you been involved with on campus? Describe any community organizations that you are involved in. Tell me about how your involvement in any of these campus or community organizations influences your identity on this campus.
- 4) How would you describe your interactions at the college? Which professors/employees do you feel more comfortable with and why? Which, if any, do you not feel comfortable with? Why?
- 5) I understand that being the first in your family to go to college can often put you in unfamiliar situations. Please describe any challenges that have you faced during your time as a college student here. Who was a resource for you on campus? What about in your community?
- 6) What advice would you give to community college employees who want to support first-generation Latinx community college students? What advice would you give to future students?

- 7) Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences on campus that you feel is important for me to know given my interests in Latinx students' experiences that I may not have thought to ask?

APPENDIX B.

PARTICIPANT DETAILS

<u>Student</u>	<u>Age</u>	Identity Marker/Country of Personal or Familial Origin	<u>Community College</u>
Rey	39	Latina/Mexico	Alliance
Juliet	19	Hispanic/Mexico	Alliance
Virginia	45	Hispanic/Mexico	Alliance
Yessica	23	Hispanic-Mexican/ Mexico	Alliance
Luna	19	Latina/Mexico	Alliance
Crystal	23	Mexican/Mexico	Alliance
Juan	20	Latino/Honduras	Bridge
Bianca	21	Latinx/*did not indicate	Bridge
Lily	22	Latina/*did not indicate	Bridge
Carla	21	Hispanic/Costa Rica	Bridge
Samantha	28	Hispanic/Puerto Rico	Partnership
Frida	38	Mexican/Mexico	Partnership

APPENDIX C.

COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH INFOGRAPHIC

COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH

Various forms of capital nurtured through cultural wealth include aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. These forms of capital draw on the knowledges Students of Color bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom (Yosso, 2006).

ASPIRATIONAL CAPITAL

The ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers.

"BUT AFTER WORKING FAST FOOD, OF COURSE MY MOM WAS HOUNDING ME. DON'T WORK FAST FOOD ALL YOUR LIFE. DON'T WORK FAST FOOD ALL YOUR LIFE. OKAY. WHAT SHOULD I WORK IN? I DON'T KNOW, FIGURE IT OUT." -YESSICA

FAMILIAL CAPITAL

A commitment to community well being and expands the concept of family to include a more broad understanding of kinship; importance of maintaining a healthy connection to our community and its resources.

"THAT'S ANOTHER REASON FOR THE MOTIVATION. I JUST WANT MY PARENTS. IT'S NOT THAT I WANT THEIR APPROVAL, BUT I WANT THEM TO KNOW THAT THEY DIDN'T COME TO THIS COUNTRY, AND THEY DIDN'T WALK ACROSS THAT BORDER FOR NO REASON. THEY WALKED ACROSS THIS BORDER JUST SO I COULD GET THIS DEGREE." -JULIET

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Networks of people and community resources that can provide instrumental and emotional support.

"I HAD NO IDEA EITHER HOW TO APPLY SO I ASKED A FRIEND OF MINE WHO ALREADY GRADUATED AND SHE WAS LIKE, I CAN HELP YOU WITH FAFSA. I HAVE NO ONE ELSE, CAUSE I'M A FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT, YOU KNOW, THE FIRST ONE GOING TO COLLEGE. SO, I'M GLAD I HAD SOMEONE THERE TO HELP ME."
- LUNA

LINGUISTIC CAPITAL

Intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style.

"I DON'T LIKE PEOPLE THINKING I'M DUMB BECAUSE I MEAN, I KNOW TWO LANGUAGES. THEY ONLY KNOW ONE." -SAMANTHA

NAVIGATIONAL CAPITAL

Acknowledges individual agency within institutional constraints, but it also connects to social networks that facilitate community navigation through places and spaces including schools.

"I MET A COUPLE OF DACA RECIPIENTS AT MY COMMUNITY COLLEGE, BUT WHAT'S CRAZY IS THEY WERE AS CLUELESS AS I WAS...BECAUSE PROBABLY 85% OF THE DACA RECIPIENTS THAT I MET DIDN'T KNOW THAT YOU CAN GET A SPONSORSHIP THROUGH YOUR EMPLOYER...SO YOU CAN PAY IN-STATE TUITION." -JUAN

RESISTANCE CAPITAL

Knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality.

"WHAT KEPT ME GOING IS THINKING, I WENT THROUGH MUCH HARDER THINGS THAN THIS. SO, I CAN'T JUST BE LIKE, OH, THEY SAID NO OR I DON'T KNOW HOW TO DO IT. NO. THEY HAVE TO PROVE TO ME THAT I CAN'T DO IT." -FRIDA

Research by Isai Robledo
Infographic by Carrie Robledo

APPENDIX D.

THEMES INFOGRAPHIC

THEMES

INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS THAT SUPPORT AND CHALLENGE LATINX STUDENTS	
SUPPORT	CHALLENGE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Veterans Affairs Centers on campus- Ry, Va, Sa, • Employees as advocates and guides- Cl, Ya, Ly, • Program Coordinators- La, Jt, Va, Ly, Sa • Campus services- Ly, Cl, Fa • Knowing that I matter- Ly, La, Jt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not enough personalized help- Jt, La, Ya, Jn, Fa • College employees don't look like me- Sa, Ya, Fa, La • Finding ways to pay for college- Jt, Ba, Jn, Fa • Choosing a major- La, Jt, Jn, Ya • Don't understand my situation- Jt, Ba, Jn, Sa, Fa, Ly
PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY FACTORS THAT SUPPORT AND CHALLENGE LATINX STUDENTS	
SUPPORT	CHALLENGE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family's direct/indirect support- Cl, Jt, Ca, Ya, Sa, Fa, Va, La • Motivation from and for family- La, Ya, Ca, Cl, Sa, Jt, Ry, Va, Fa, Ba, Ly • Encouragement from friends- La, Jn, Jt, Ry • Community organizations- Jt, Fa, Ba, La, Cl • Community networks- Ba, Ly, Jn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family's understanding of job vs career- Ba, Ly, Ca • Mental health stigma in Latinx communities- Ba, Ly, Cl, Jn • Not enough Latinx role models- La, Ba, Ly, Ya • Feeling alone- Jt, La, Ly, Ba, Jn • Pressures of being a role model- Ba, La, Ly, Va
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND FOR FUTURE LATINX STUDENTS	
COMMUNITY COLLEGES	FUTURE LATINX STUDENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More diversity in college employees- Jt, Ya, Sa, Jn, Ly, Ba, Fa, Cl • Easily accessible financial information & resources- Jt, La, Jn • Communication beyond classes and grades- Cl, Ly, La • Patience and Empathy- Jt, Fa, Ly • Detailed and personalized guidance- Jt, Jn, Ya, La, Fa, Ly, Ba, Ca • Listen to me- Jn, Jt, La 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be prepared for challenges but don't give up- Fa, Jt, La, Ba, Ly, Ca, Ry • Find and use resources- Jt, Ry, Ya, Jn, Sa, Cl, Va • Don't be afraid to ask for help- Jt, Jn, Ya, La, Cl, Sa • You're not alone- Jt, Va, La • Stay focused on what motivates you- Ly, Jt, Ry, Cl • Do it for you- Ry, Ly, Ba, Ca, Jn • Be proud of yourself- Sa, La, Cl, Ry
REACHING MY GOALS THROUGH RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE	
RESISTANCE	RESILIENCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge negative statistics and perceptions- Va, Ly, Ba, Ry, Jn, Jt • It's easier to quit, but I won't- Jn, La, Jt, Ly, Ba, Fa, Ry • The hard way was the only way- Va, Jt, Ca, Ba, Jn, Ya, Fa • Querer es poder- Ry, Ya, Jt • Discouraged but not deterred- Jt, Ba, Ca, Jn • We are pioneers- Jn, Jt, Va, Ya, Ry, Ly, Ba, Ca, Cl, Sa, Fa, La 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choosing my major- Ya, La, Jn, Ry, Jt, Cl, Ba • Finding my own resources- Jn, Ya, Ba, Fa • Special routes and special solutions- Jn, Jt, Ya, Fa • I can and I will- Jn, La, Jt, Ry, Ya, Liy, Ba, Sa • Mental health and stability- Ly, Ba, Jn
I AM INTERCONNECTED WITH MY COMMUNITY	
SENSE OF COMMUNITY	REPRESENTATION FOR MY COMMUNITY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Latinos are one big family- Sa, Ly, Ba, Fa, La • Informal networks- Jn, Ba, Ya, La, Fa • My struggles don't have to be your struggles- Jn, Ba, Ly, Jt, Va, Ry • My resources are our resources- Ly, Jn, Ba, La, Fa • Your success is my success- Ya, Fa, Jt, Ba 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My progress is our progress- La, Ya, Va, Fa • Fulfilling our parents' dreams- Ry, Jt, Ba, Ly, Va, La, Sa, Ya, Cl • Serving my community- Ba, Ly, Jn, La, Cl • Breaking through the glass ceiling- Fa, Ly, Ba, Jt • I'm the first of many more to come- Ly, Jn, Ba, Jt, Va, Cl

Research by Isai Robledo
Infographic by Carrie Robledo